

CONSTRUING CRITICALITY IN ESSAY GENRE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract

Criticality is established as one of most important characteristics of university essay genre. Students are required to demonstrate their critical thinking in their writing. However, criticality is a concept, which is less understood among students and tutors. Further, there is a little agreement among researchers on how to investigate the linguistic features associated with enacting critical stance. Therefore, this paper demonstrates how criticality is achieved in essay genre in the discipline of English literature. The argument in this paper is that the linguistic features traditionally associated with enacting criticality interact with other linguistic features to achieve critical stance in a written text. A systemic functional analysis of essays in English literature drawn from British Academic Writing English (BAWE) corpus demonstrates this interaction. Specifically, the findings show that the linguistic resources for the creation of ideational meaning interact with those for critical positioning to achieve critical thinking in university essays. These findings have implication for teaching academic writing in the discipline of English literature.

Keywords: Academic writing, criticality, essay genre, stance

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Introduction

Over the past decades, a number of studies have been conducted to investigate the characteristics of university essay genre (e.g. Bruce, Humphrey & Econoumou, Lancaster, and Woodward-kron). The main argument in these studies is that critical thinking is one of the most important characteristics of university writing. In fact, it is demonstrated in these studies that criticality is an essential component of successful writing. However, Woodward-kron points out that criticality is a concept that is not understood among students and lecturers do not provide a linguistic explanation of how criticality is achieved in writing (121). Students rely on general advice on academic writing usually presented in writing guidelines, assessment rubric and tutors' feedback on students writing (122). In writing guidelines and assessment rubric, it is often indicated that students should demonstrate critical thinking or critical analysis. However, Lea & Street demonstrate that these are general guidelines and it can be difficult for students to apply them to their specific writing context (158). In addition, these guidelines are not accompanied by the linguistic and discourse resources that are used to achieve critical stance in essay genre

There are, of course, a number of studies (e.g. Aull & Lancaster, Bruce, Deakin & Lee, etc.), that are conducted to tease apart linguistic features associated with enacting critical stance in academic writing. Findings in these studies show that there is a contrast between analytical and critical writing and less successful descriptive writing. This line of findings indicate that successful essays tend to incorporate a wide range of lexical and grammatical realizations of critical stance. In contrast, less successful essays contain lexical and grammatical realizations of critical stance in lower frequency. According to Deakin & Lee, low-rated essays tend to

present arguments as fact, with minimal consideration of counter-arguments or attempt to mitigate claims (22). However, this dichotomy “oversimplify the complexities involved in writing for academic audience” (Humphrey & Economidou 37). Successful critical writing contains linguistic features of descriptive writing because, as Humphrey & Economidou points out critical writing depends upon the accumulation of knowledge presented through description and developed through analysis (38). In addition, Deakin & Lee point out that less successful writing may contain lexical and grammatical realization of critical stance “with other aspects of low-rated texts, such as poor clausal- phrasal- level grammar, vocabulary, content and organization” (22). Therefore, it would be necessary to investigate how linguistic and discourse features associated with enacting critical stance interact with other features in essays. Such an analysis would provide insight into the way L1 and L2 student writers not only demonstrate their disciplinary knowledge but also enact persuasive and critical stance.

This paper analyze the linguistic and discourse features associated with critical stance in university essay genre in the discipline of English literature studies. It also examines the ways these features interact with other linguistic features associated with demonstrating disciplinary knowledge. The essays are drawn from British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus. These essays represent successful writing at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Literature Review

University essay genre

Essay is the most occurring genre in higher education (Moore & Morton 49), particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences. This is supported by the fact that in electronically academic written English corpuses, essays constitute a higher percentage of assignments in Arts and Humanity and Social Sciences. Bruce points out that in British Academic Written

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English Corpus, essays constitute 86% of Arts and Humanity assignments and 56 % of Social Sciences assignments (14).

Students writing essay genre have to satisfy certain requirements. These requirements can be classified in terms of rhetorical purpose and lexical grammatical features. In terms of rhetorical purpose, an essay is generally organized into three stages. These are: an introduction that states the position of the writer with regard to the topic, a body section that presents and develops supporting points to the thesis, and a conclusion that consolidate and reiterate the thesis (Hyland 69). In line with these stages, Coffin & Hewings identifies three ways of structuring an essay in terms of three types of rhetorical purpose: exposition, discussion and challenges (Bruce 14). For each type, Coffin & Hewing find different functional stages of an essay. These are the background information, stance taking, detailed sub-arguments and restatement of the overall position. Nesi & Gardner extend these three types of rhetorical purpose by identifying six types of essay genre: exposition, discussion, challenge, factorial, consequential and commentary. For each essay genre, they examines the types of content information that each stage of essay genre convey (28). For instance, the essay genre termed exposition has the following internal content organization: thesis, evidence and restatement of the thesis. The essay genre termed discussion has the following internal content organization: issue, alternative arguments, and final position. These genre stages account for the way meaning is organized within an extended argument. In terms of lexicogrammatical features, an essay genre presents linguistic features that describe disciplinary knowledge. According to Woodward-kron, this is accomplished through the process of naming, defining and taxonomizing (133). In fact, these linguistic features are related to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) description of ideational meaning. Ideational meaning refers to register variable of field, with present the nature of disciplinary specific activities, including its knowledge structure. Ideational meaning is concerned with the going on, the

happening, the being, the feeling, and the sensing through lexical relation in discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen 170). In addition, an essay genre presents linguistic features that enact social relations. This includes linguistic features that are used to develop and defend a position, to appeal to a reader's logic and emotion, to anticipate and counter a reader's reactions, and to align with and distance oneself from cited sources (Deakin & Lee 21). Indeed, these linguistic features include those that are used to construe critical stance.

Examining critical stance in essay genre

Among the studies that examine critical stance in academic writing, there appear to be agreement about the importance of the construct in university essay genre (e.g. Aull & Lancaster, Biber, Bruce, Deakin & Lee, Humphrey & Econoumou, Jiang & Hyland, Lancaster, and Woodward-kron). Indeed, it is claimed in these studies that academic writing involves not only reporting knowledge, but also interpreting, arguing, evaluating and persuading readers. Jiang & Hyland point out that academic writing requires writers to position themselves with regard not only to "the views presented in the text", but also to "the epistemological beliefs and values of discourse academic community" (530). Therefore, the term that have been used to examine this positioning is critical stance although it has been used under different constructs, including evaluation, metadiscourse, and appraisal.

Critical stance refers to an array of lexical and grammatical resources that writers/speakers employed to express attitudes, feelings, and evaluation in discourse, including the strategies that they adopt to position themselves with regard to the views being presented in the text (Biber 99; Hyland 174; Lancaster 29). In order to examine these lexical and grammatical resources in essay, many studies draw on the analytical construct from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). They draw on this construct because SFL, in its genre and register theory, provides the

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means to examine the ways meaning within a text and the social purpose of the text are achieved through functional stages. In SFL, three modes of meanings are distinguished. These are ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings. According to Martin, these three modes of meaning are associated with register variables of field, tenor and mode (11). Ideational meaning is a resource for building field knowledge, enabling participation in domestic, recreational, academic and professional activities. Interpersonal meaning is a resource for valuing these activities and enacting tenor (negotiation of social relations). Textual meaning is a resource for phrasing ideational and interpersonal meaning together in textures sensitive to mode (spoken or written discourses). In addition, SFL description of lexicogrammar and discourse semantic provide the means to unpack the lexical and grammatical resources that are employed to create simultaneously these three modes of meaning within functional stages.

The studies that draw on the analytical construct from SFL focus on the lexical and grammatical resources that are employed to create interpersonal meaning (e.g. Aull & Lancaster, Biber, Bruce, Deakin & Lee, Lancaster, etc.). Many of these studies draw on SFL appraisal framework to examine the linguistic feature associated with critical stance and to establish a link between critical stance and interpersonal meaning. In these studies, it is demonstrated that writers use resources from appraisal system to enact the register variable of tenor or interpersonal meaning, and therefore to construct critical stance in essay. These resources are classified in terms of attitude, engagement and graduation (Martin & White). Attitude is concerned with “the linguistic mechanism for sharing emotions “(1). Engagement groups together “all those locutions which provide the means for the authorial voice to position itself with respect to the other voices and alternative positions construed as being in play in the current communicative context” (94). Graduation encompasses “the linguistic mechanism by which writers/speakers graduate the force of the utterance or the focus of the categorization by which semantic values

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are identified” (94).

However, writers, particularly students writing essays, do not only use linguistic resources to enact interpersonal relations. They also use linguistic resources to demonstrate their knowledge. In fact, they use linguistic resources to create ideational meaning in texts. The resources that have been developed to account for the register variable of field are patterned in SFL system of transitivity (Halliday & Matthiessen 170-305). Transitivity is concerned with the linguistic resources that are used to construe “the outer experience- the going on out there in the world around us- and the inner experience- the going on inside ourselves, in the world of consciousness” (Halliday & Matthiessen 170). Therefore, this study examines how linguistic features associated with creating interpersonal meaning interact with linguistic features associated with creating ideational meaning to achieve critical stance. This stems from the fact that the linguistic features from appraisal system are used along with other linguistic features.

Data

Specific findings in this study are informed by an analysis of 2 essay assignments within the discipline of English literature. These essays were selected non-purposely from British Academic Written English Corpus (BAWE). It is acknowledged that the essays from BAWE represent successful writing at undergraduate and postgraduate level within the discipline of English literature. In fact, English literature was chosen because essays are often used to assess learning in this discipline.

Analysis

The authors analyzed each essay in terms of schematic stages and linguistic patterns associated with construing critical stance. In terms of schematic stages, the essays were

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segmented in order to identify stages through with a text moves to achieve its overall social purpose. This segmentation of essays consisted of identifying the type of information that is communicated across different stages. These stages correspond to Woodward-Kroon's concept of micro-genre in a macro-genre structure (28) and to Bruce's notion of cognitive genre (163). According to these researchers, schematic stages can consist of recounts, reports, explanations, discussion. Table 1 provides explanation of these terms.

Table 1: Description of genres occurring in text

| Genres | Rhetorical purpose |
|-------------|--|
| Recount | Presentation of information that is essentially chronological |
| Explanation | Focuses on the process or presents information with a focus on the means by which something is achieved. |
| Discussion | Presents both sides of an argument in order to make a informed recommendation or focuses on the organization of information in relation to possible outcomes, conclusion and choice. |
| Report | Presents non-sequential information or describes phenomena or a number of classes of things in a system of classification |

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In terms of linguistic patterns, the analysis focused on the linguistic devices that were used to demonstrate knowledge- ideational meaning- and to enact critical stance. Specifically, the focus was on the linguistic patterns from and across transitivity system and appraisal system. The coding of these linguistic patterns is found in Table 2 and table Three

Table 2. The coding of linguistic patterns from transitivity system (Halliday & Matthiessen 170-305)

| Type of process | Category meaning | Example from the essays |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Material | 'doing' 'happening | Clarissa is <u>undertaking</u> the traditionally feminine project of giving a party. |
| Behavioral | Behaving | She thereby also <u>confesses</u> difficulties with her gender identity |
| Mental | sensing, thinking, feeling | Martin <u>believes</u> this moment makes Hawthorne and Hester one |
| Verbal | Saying | August Bebel <u>stated</u> in his works that... |
| Relational | being, attributing, identifying | The youngest generation in this novel <u>is</u> almost, and boastfully, male' |

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| | | |
|-------------|----------|---|
| Existential | existing | <i>There is</i> a homoerotic element to John Dowell's thoughts about, and admiration for, Edward Ashburnham |
|-------------|----------|---|

Table 3: The coding of linguistic patterns from appraisal system (Martin & White)

| Appraisal category | meaning | Example from the essays |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Attitudes | construe emotion | The nature of Hester's speech is <i>impossible</i> to generalize as its more 'male' attributes dissolve when she is overcome by <i>forceful</i> love |
| Disclaim: deny | rejection of alternative views | With this introduction of homosexuality to the texts, both authors reveal that gender is <i>not</i> easy to define |
| Disclaim: counter | opposing an alternative view | <i>Although</i> the women in Mrs. Dalloway are not oppressed or ruled by men, they reveal a dependency of sorts on their husband or upon men in general. |
| Proclaim: concur | agreeing with the addressee | <i>Certainly</i> Winterson too is acutely aware of the Lacanian <i>jouissance</i> that drives our search for social identity. |

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Proclaim: endorse construing external view as correct A second female character of *Mrs Dalloway* shows rudimentary homosexual traits.

Proclaim: pronounce intensifying the views Indeed, " in Scottish novels...protagonists, are rarely, if ever, in control of their existences, and [are] morbidly aware of the fact.

Entertain making a space for alternative views It seems this dilemma of the self has extended into the zeitgeist of contemporary literature

Attribute attributing views to external sources August Bebel *stated* in his works that...

The results

The findings of the analysis of the two essays show that the essays are organized in three stages: introduction, body and conclusion. Across these stages, information is organized as follow. In the introduction, two moves for staging the content were identified. These were the background move and the preview move. The background move contextualized the topic. The preview move provides the reader with a guide to interpret the rest of the essay. In the body stage, the schematic stages consisted of recounts, discussion and recount in the first essay and in the second essays; they consisted of recounts, recounts. In the conclusion, the schematic

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structure consisted of reinforcement of the discussion in the body paragraph. The analysis of the linguistic features across the stages revealed the following. In the first essay, the linguistic features which describe material process occurred 109 times; relational process, 100 times; mental process, 26 times; verbal process, 14 times; behavioral process, 5 times; and existential process, 3 times. These resources were used together with linguistic resources to construe critical stance. These linguistic resources included entertain resources that occurred 42 times; attitude resources, 32 times; disclaim deny, 25 times; disclaim counter, 19 times; attribute, 11 times; proclaim concur, 4 times; proclaim endorse, 3 times; proclaim pronounce, 1 time. In the second essay, the linguistic resources which describe material process occurred 123 times; relational process, 78 times; mental process, 25 times; verbal process, 5 times; existential process, 3 times; and behavioral process, 0 time. These resources were used together with linguistic resources to construe criticality. These linguistic resources included entertain which occurred 36 times; attitude resources, 29 times; disclaim deny, 20 times; disclaim counter, 19 times; attribute, 8 times; proclaim pronounce, 8 times; proclaim concur, 2 times; proclaim endorse, 1 time. Table 4 provides the summary of these finding.

Table 4: Mapping the linguistic features of the essays

| Essay structure | Essay 1 | Essay 2 |
|-----------------|------------|------------|
| Introduction | Background | Background |
| | Preview | Preview |
| Body | Recount | Recount |

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| | Discussion | Recount |
|---------------|---|--|
| | Recount | |
| Conclusion | Reinforcement | Reinforcement |
| <hr/> | | |
| Process types | Material (109), Relational (100) Mental (26), Verbal (14) Behavioral (5), Existential (3) | Material (123), Relational (78) Mental (25), Verbal (5) Existential (3), Behavioral (0) |
| Appraisal | Entertain (42), attitude (32) Disclaim deny (25), disclaim counter (19) Attribute (11), proclaim concur (4) Proclaim endorse (3), proclaim pronounce (1) | Disclaim deny (20), counter (19) Entertain (36), attitude (29) Attribute (8), pronounce (8) Concur (2), endorse (1) |

Construing Critical stance in the selected essays

Interpreting the register variable of field

The register variable of field describes experiences and disciplinary knowledge structure. This is achieved through the system of transitivity, which construe the world of experience into process types. Therefore, the findings of the analysis seem to indicate that the material process and the relational process occur frequently in the sampled essays. The material process is concerned with the going on and the doing. In the sampled essays, the material process is concerned with describing the actions or the doing of the author and of the characters in the novel under analysis. The relational process is concerned with classifying and identifying characters in the novel.

Excerpt 1

Both novels offer interesting male and female characters (Relational process), who clearly construct (Material process) their gender and associated gender roles through their behavior towards each other and the role they play in society. *The Good Soldier* presents two couples, the Americans John and Florence Dowell, and their English friends, Edward and Leonora Ashburnham (Relational process). By means of his depiction of the main characters, Ford gives (Material process) an insight into his understanding of gender at the beginning of the twentieth century, which may be related to his personal experiences (Relational process), especially to that of marriage. His representation of gender is not conventional with regard to Leonora's and, even more so, Florence's personalities (relational process). Neither of the women show a characteristic obedience to their husbands (Relational process). With their marriages, in Leonora's case one arranged by her parents, they gained a certain position in society and therefore achieved an independence of sorts (Material process). For example, when her husband has affairs with other women (Material process), Leonora also takes a lover (Material process). She even organized Maisie Maidan's trip from India to their residence in Bad Nauheim (Material process) where she 'wanted [her] for an adulteress' for her husband (Mental process). Florence Dowell, as the second main female character, takes numerous lovers behind her locked door', in particular Edward Ashburnham and Jimmy (Material process). This open demonstration of women having affairs as men do seems to be a striking understanding of their gender (Relational process). These women can do the same things as men (Material process).

In this excerpt, the choice of material and relational processes allowed the students to classify, identify the characters and describe the actions of the characters in the novels under analysis.

By the choice of these processes, it is clear that the students classified and identified the

characters in the novels in the same way the authors of the novels classified and identified them. They also describe the actions of the characters in the same way the authors of the novels describe the actions of the characters. This suggests that the student agree with the way the authors described female and male characters and this may represent disciplinary way of doing.

Interpreting the register variable of tenor

The register variable of tenor is concerned with the creation of interpersonal meaning in the text. It deals with persuasive and critical stance in the text. This is achieved by linguistic resources from and across appraisal system. Therefore, the results of the analysis of the sampled essays appear to show that entertain, attitudes and disclaim resources occur frequently. Entertain resources are used to express doubt and to signal that the views being presented in the text is one among other possible views. These resources are used to make allowance for alternative views. Attitudes resources are used for evaluation. Disclaim resources are used to acknowledge a view and then to reject it.

Excerpt 2

Edward 'believed (entertain) in the virtue, tenderness and moral support of women', but (disclaim, counter-concessive expression) he has to find out that the gender roles have changed and that women may (entertain) suppress men. Leonora, who is renowned for 'her coldness' and, perhaps (entertain) more markedly, Nancy Rufford 'desired to see Edward suffer and gave him hell'. According to Ford, cited in Haslam, (attribute) Edward Ashburnham represents 'the polygamous desires that underlie all men'. Taking this statement by the author into consideration, one may (entertain) assume that it

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is normal for men to have extra-marital affairs and that this is therefore one role related to this sex. Furthermore, being strong *may* (entertain) also been seen as a part of this role, whereas Edward. On the one hand, he is rather *weak - a stereotypically feminine* (attitude) trait - which *can* (entertain) be seen when he is destroyed by women and finally commits suicide.

Excerpt 3

Although (disclaim, counter-concessive) the women in *Mrs Dalloway* are *not* (disclaim, deny) really oppressed or ruled by men, they reveal a dependency of sorts on their husbands or upon men in general. The disadvantages of the female sex provoked Sally Seton's denouncement of Hugh as having 'represented all that was most detestable in British middle-class life and that she considered him responsible for the state of those *poor* (attitude) girls in Piccadilly'.

In excerpt 2 and 3, the use of entertain linguistic resources allowed the student to position his/her interpretation of the views in the novels as one among other interpretation. Therefore, he/she made allowance for alternative interpretation. For instance, the use of *may*, in “*Taking this statement by the author into consideration, one may assume that it is normal for men to have extra-marital affairs and that this is therefore one role related to this sex*” implies that other may have different interpretation. On the other hand, the use of disclaim linguistic resources allowed the students to concede a held view in the novel and then counter it. For instance, the use of “*although*” in “***Although** the women in *Mrs Dalloway* are not really oppressed or ruled by men, they reveal a dependency of sorts on their husbands or upon men in general*” implies that the student acknowledges the view in *Mrs Dalloway* that women are not really oppressed or ruled by men and then he/she presented this view as not tenable because

women depend on their husbands.

Meshing the register variables of field and tenor

Meshing the register variables of field and tenor consists of examining the ways in which the linguistic features associated with creating ideational meaning interact with linguistic resources associated with interpersonal meaning to achieve critical stance. Excerpt 1 is the best example that demonstrates how this is achieved. In excerpt 1, the student started by identifying and describing the actions of the characters in the novel under analysis. For instance, in “*Both novels offer interesting male and female characters, who clearly construct their gender and associated gender roles through their behavior towards each other and the role they play in society. The Good Soldier presents two couples, the Americans John and Florence Dowell, and their English friends, Edward and Leonora Ashburnham*” he/she used relational process to identify male and female characters in the novels. However, when it comes to interpreting or analyzing the depiction of these characters, he/she used linguistic resources from and across appraisal system to position him/herself with regard to the analysis. For instance, in “*Both novels offer interesting male and female characters, who clearly construct their gender and associated gender roles through their behavior towards each other and the role they play in society.*”, the use of proclaim concur, ‘clearly’, positions the student as agreeing with the fact that male and female characters are depicted in the novel in order to show how they construct gender and gender roles. Another example, “*For example, when her husband has affairs with other women, Leonora also takes a lover. She even organized Maisie Moidan's trip from India to their residence in Bad Nauheim where she 'wanted [her] for an adulteress' for her husband. Florence Dowell, as the second main female character, takes numerous lovers behind her locked door', in particular Edward Ashburnham and Jimmy. This open demonstration of women*

having affairs as men do seems to be a striking understanding of their gender.” In this example, the student used material process to describe the actions, the doing of characters in the novels. However, when it comes to interpreting and analyzing these actions of characters, he/she used an entertain resource ‘seems’ to position him/herself as making allowance for alternative interpretation or analysis. These findings suggest that an essay in literature is organized in such way that the linguistic features associated with ideational meaning interact with those associated with interpersonal meaning to construe critical stance. Within one stage, on the one hand, linguistic resources to describe material and relational processes are used to identify and describe the actions of the characters in the novel under analysis. On the other hand, linguistic resources for critical positioning are used to interpret and analyze the depiction and the actions of the characters. These findings corroborate Wilder’s theory of positioning strategies in students’ writing in English literature. In her study, it was found that one of positioning strategies that is often identified in successful writing is “appearance/reality topos”, whereby the writers invokes the apparent meaning of the text before arguing for the real meaning (176). In arguing for the real meaning, writers use entertain devices or hedging devices, e.g. *This open demonstration of women having affairs as men do seems to be a striking understanding of their gender.*

Conclusion

This paper examines the linguistic resources associated with construing critical stance in University essay genre. I analyses how these linguistic resources interact with other resources associated with demonstrating disciplinary knowledge. Major findings indicate that entertain, attitude, and disclaim resources are used in higher frequency in the sampled essays. The results also indicate that linguistic resources describe material and relational processes are used in

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higher frequency in the sampled essays. More importantly, the findings show that the linguistic resources to describe material and relational processes are used to classify, identify and describe the actions of characters in the novels under analysis. On the other hand, the linguistic resources for critical positioning are used to interpret and analyze the depiction of the characters and their actions in the novels under analysis. These findings have implication for teaching and assessing academic writing in the discipline of English literature. Instructors can draw on these results to design an academic writing program, assessment rubric. They can also use these findings to give feedback to students.



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