ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of evaluative expressions in the construal of arguments in a set of high-rated and low-rated English language argumentative tertiary-level essays. Using one aspect of Hunston’s (1989, 2000) concept of the evaluation of status, the paper identifies statement types and illustrates their use in the development of more- and less-successful arguments. The types of linguistic expressions associated with writer opinion, and their possible rhetorical functions, are also highlighted to illustrate their role in the development of effective arguments. Generally, high-rated writers use certain statement types to reinforce the importance of evidence provided in an argument. Implications for the teaching of certain statement types and their linguistic expression are also discussed.

Introduction

Tertiary-level writing assignments require writing skills that reflect the ability of students to think critically and to persuade their readers towards a position in relation to issues of relevance. The need for these skills, in various content-based writing assignments, has been variously reported, for example by Zhu (2004) and Granville and Dison (2005). As Woodward-Kron (2002: 121) states, ‘critical analysis is firmly established as one of the most desirable characteristics of undergraduate writing’. Such skills are often assessed through the argumentative essay, a typical classroom genre (Johns 1995) that students have to write as part of continual assessment. In this genre, the need to make one’s position clear, through careful rationalisation, justification and persuasion, inevitably involves critical evaluation and assessment of various ideas and events.

The underlying skill of persuasion presupposes rationalisation and justification, and, as such, the production of persuasive texts provides for the development of necessary critical and analytical thinking skills (Crammond 1998). Persuasion may be effected in various ways and in textual practice, as Coffin (2002: 503) explains:

It has been argued in the recent proliferation of text and discoursed-based research across the social sciences that, even though stance may not be explicitly expressed, texts do a great deal of work (beyond providing evidence) to persuade and position their ‘consumers’.

This implicit work that texts do, beyond providing evidence, may involve the effective use of evaluative expressions. Students may not have the professional content or discourse knowledge of experts, but assignments often require them to learn how to analyse and evaluate content knowledge, position themselves in disciplinary debates and articulate that positioning in a congruent manner. Woodward-Kron (2002: 122) establishes the commonalities of critical analysis, which are expected of professional academic and undergraduate writers, as ‘critiquing established knowledge, developing an argument supported by evidence, and evaluating phenomena according to selected criteria’. This critical ability is akin to Gee’s (1999: 174) ‘ways of valuing’ when he explains that undergraduates learn that there are ways of ‘being-doing-thinking-valuing-speaking-listening-writing-reading Discourses’. Thus, among other things, students need to learn conventional ways of making value judgments in the academic writing context. Furthermore, the centrality of critical analysis in tertiary writing is evident in subject guidelines, criteria for assessment, question prompts, essay-writing guidelines and marker commentaries (Clanchy and Ballard 1981; Germov 2000; Woodward-Kron 2002).
However, Farrell et al (1997) observe a lack of clarity in the terms associated with critical analysis when they call for the critical practices expected of students to be unmasked as students learn to write academic essays. Woodward-Kron (2002) also points out the many meanings associated with the term critical analysis and that the term is not well understood by lecturers or students. Consequently, it might be useful to examine student writing in order to characterise more- and less-effective expressions of evaluation in the exemplification of arguments.

Different facets of the expression of critical perspectives, or writer opinion, in professional academic texts have been investigated from various angles using a range of terms including stance, metadiscourse, hedges, evaluation and appraisal (van Kopple 1985; Hunston 1989; Conrad and Biber 2000; Hyland 2002; White 2002). The multiplicity of approaches presents somewhat different, and sometimes overlapping, perspectives on how critical perspectives work in texts. Generally, these studies adopt approaches that presume the possibility of differentiating evaluative and non-evaluative lexical items or phrases in a text. Hunston (2000), however, questions whether boundaries can be drawn around a set of linguistic features that create textual interaction and whether linguistic resources that convey value judgments can be differentiated from those that do not. As Hunston (2000) explains, a non-evaluative word in one context may be highly evaluative in another, depending on the surrounding linguistic environment.

The complexity of defining the concept of evaluation has spurred the development of analytical frameworks that more systematically and comprehensively sieve elements of interpersonal meaning. As Hunston (2000: 205) aptly points out in her analysis of evaluation, ‘evaluation is a highly complex phenomenon that can best be handled by making a number of distinctions’. Hunston’s differentiation between evaluation on the autonomous and interactive planes is one such distinction that helps identify the role of evaluation in texts.

This paper complements the growing body of work on interpersonal meaning in two ways. First, it draws on Hunston’s (2000) concept of the evaluation of status where evaluative meaning is construed at the clausal/propositional levels, rather than at the usual lexical level. The need to differentiate evaluative from non-evaluative lexis is lessened as the propositional meaning in context, expressed through different statement types, is emphasised. Second, in line with more recent work (for example, by Hewings [2004] and Dressen [2003]), this analysis has been conducted on a set of student-written academic essays. Student texts have not been the focus of investigations for interpersonal meaning to the extent that professionally written texts have been.

Hunston’s (2000) definition of the term writer’s opinion is used to investigate the function of evaluation in student argumentation. Writer’s opinion broadly covers these two aspects: the writer’s opinion on the likelihood of events and his/her judgment of good or bad. The writer’s opinion can be conveyed on either the interactive or autonomous plane. On the interactive plane, the role of the writer as a text constructor is emphasised as he/she comments on the function and likelihood of propositions in text. On the autonomous plane, the writer’s opinion comments on a multitude of real-world objects and entities and the kinds of things the text says about the world. The interactive plane is concerned with the construction of text and the autonomous plane with content.

This paper focuses on the aspect of writer’s opinion that concerns the evaluation of the status of propositions on the interactive plane. This constitutes one aspect of Hunston’s framework of the evaluation of status, value and relevance. The interactive plane, where the writer’s opinion shapes the construction of text, is logically highly relevant to the investigation of critical analysis and practice in writing. On the interactive plane, the writer informs the reader on the structure of the text through the expression of propositional content in various statement types. Hunston (2000: 186) explains that this is a choice that indicates the ‘writer’s alignment of statement and world’. Choosing from a range of statement types, such as fact, assessment or hypothesis (see Figure 1), attributes a status to a proposition. This in turn constrains reader response to the statement, as ‘statements of different statuses are responded to differently by the reader, and are judged by the reader according to different criteria’ (Hunston 2000: 184).
The effectiveness of a good argument can be analysed from various perspectives. In this paper, the evaluative focus is prioritised as the exemplification of arguments is analysed in two sets of scripts. More specifically, this paper aims to characterise the nature of writer opinions in the context of pertinent examples of argumentation. It then draws instructive conclusions on the patterns of statement types that configure the status of propositions in more- or less-successful arguments. It also aims to demonstrate how these statement types may contribute to the effectiveness of arguments.

Although these differences may not fully account for grade differences, they may underline the importance of the appropriate use of such resources to the evaluative quality of the arguments. Furthermore, the evaluation of status constitutes only one aspect of Hunston's framework and thus may not provide a complete account of how the notion works cumulatively in text. However, the analysis provides a qualitative perspective, which may possibly explain the pertinent aspects of exemplification used in more- or less-successful arguments.

Given the plethora of terms associated with the expression of analytical abilities and opinion, this paper investigates writer's opinion using the guidelines given to students for the completion of an assignment task, in order to unpack the notion of critical practice. Among the list of specifications in these guidelines, there are descriptions relevant to critical/analytical skills:

- Interpreting and applying other people’s terms and ideas and arriving at an assessment in an original way; analysing and describing a phenomenon; using clear language to state, explain and exemplify one’s claim and main points; organising the essay as an argument to support claim; weakening, problematising, rejecting, negotiating an original statement.

According to the assessment rubric made available to students, important features of analysis require general cohesiveness and purposiveness in identification of theme and central thrust, logical development and argumentation with appropriate evidence.

It is clear from the guidelines that the expression of critical ability involves the writer’s assessment of relevant ideas and phenomenon and the use of this assessment to persuade readers towards certain positions through evidence-based arguments. To critique knowledge or evaluate phenomena and evidence contributes to the construal of the writer’s opinion (Woodward-Kron 2002).
Method

The examples analysed in this paper were drawn from assignments written by first-year undergraduates who were reading English Language at the National University of Singapore. The essay topic was:

One compelling reason for change is the need for language to adapt itself to the needs and realities of the speakers. Discuss the above statement by focusing on changes to the English Language in either the Middle English period or the context of the USA.

The essays were taken from a larger data set of 225 essays collected as part of the author's doctoral research into evaluative expressions in argumentative essays. The students were non-native speakers of English and had all scored at least a B3 grade in their General Paper or its equivalent. These essays were graded by four non-native English-language tutors who were highly proficient in the language, having been trained in English-medium universities. General aspects of the marking criteria were agreed upon by the markers. These included the need to present original arguments and provide evidence for the position taken and the need for basic organisational details, such as the presentation of an introduction with a well-defined scope and argument and a conclusion summarising the main arguments. The current investigation was informed by the gradings and by marker comments written in the margins and at the end of the essays, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Selection of marker comments on low-rated scripts

| Reasonable answer. Could be better with more examples and better linking between paragraphs. (S24) |
| The essay requires you to show and argue that change in language is related to new realities, and it is this that has to be made clear. (S25) |
| Too much focus on external history and its details, not enough on internal history. No examples of language change here have been provided. (S21) |
| You have taken great pains to give considerable details of the historical and political factors that led to the formation of American English. But the answer becomes rather lopsided when you don’t support it with adequate number of examples of language change to illustrate your points. (S17) |
| You are required to discuss the quotation by referring to language changes (in English) during the ME period. (S19) |
| Your essay reads like a patchwork of fragments picked up from different parts of the lecture notes and the prescribed readings, with no attempt at coherently arguing for how changes was brought in American English and inadequately supported by examples. (S16) |

Only essays scoring grades A and C/D were analysed, as the aim of the research was to compare and contrast evaluative expressions that may have contributed to the two ends of the grade scale (Table 1).

| Table 1: Composition of grades of selected English Language essays |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Letter grade | A+ | A | A− | C+ | C | D+ | D |
| Number of essays | 4 | 2 | 7 | 8 | 3 | 0 | 3 |

In the more extensive study, each essay was parsed into independent clauses and numbered accordingly. From a discourse perspective, analysing the whole essay, rather than just selected segments, provides the researcher with sufficient context to better interpret the rhetorical intent of the writer. The unit of analysis was the grammatical unit of an independent clause, rather than each proposition based on semantic criteria. The use of independent clauses allowed the calculation of simple averages of different statement types. In analysing statement types, identification of key words and a more qualitative interpretative identification process (Dressen 2003) were necessary, as the significance of statement types had to be understood in the particular contexts of use. Each clause was analysed for its statement type...
using the descriptions in the appendix as a guide. Table 2 provides a sample textual analysis identified as S1 10–15.3

Table 2: Sample text analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample text</th>
<th>Statement type</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i  This [Middle English] period was actually initiated by the Norman Conquest in 1066, which was seen to have a profound influence on Middle English.</td>
<td>Interpretation-significance</td>
<td>The cause of the onset of the Middle English period is identified; hence, an interpretation-significance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii With the arrival of the Normans, English ceased to be the language of the governing classes.</td>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>A factual statement that can be verified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii As a result, French became the language of the upper classes in England and English was relegated to the status of a 'peasant language'.</td>
<td>Interpretation-significance</td>
<td>A causal factor identified. Also the writer’s expression of good–bad about the statuses of both the French and the English language in the transitional stage after the Norman Conquest is an evaluation of a real-world entity or evaluation on the autonomous plane where the reader is informed on the content of the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv The sentiments of society during this period echoed that of Mathew of Westminster, who said, ‘Whoever was unable to speak French was considered a vile and contemptible person by the common people.’</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>An evaluative statement reflecting society’s sentiments, hence an assessment. Also, on the interactive plane, the writer’s opinion comes through the source of a proposition indicated. The writer attributes the assessment of people who do not speak French as ‘vile and contemptuous’ to a known historical figure, Matthew of Westminster. Compared to sentences iii and v, it is less forceful in the expression of the writer’s commitment to the propositions within, indicating a degree of the writer’s opinion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v  Hence, there was only a trickle of French borrowings since English continued to be used largely in low level arenas.</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>The writer evaluates the impact of a causal factor; hence, an assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vi Examples of some French borrowings during this time include words like garden, market and wage.</td>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>Language data is provided to substantiate the assessment made in sentence v.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An inter-rater analysis was conducted on a randomly selected 15 per cent of scripts, as not all the scripts could be subjected to such an analysis. The initial level of agreement between the two raters was 82 per cent. However, after discussion, they were able to reconcile many of their differences and the level of agreement after discussion was 95 per cent.

According to Hunston (2000), the primary differences between categories of status are in the types and sources of statements. Writer activity (exemplified by the statement type) is identified through lexical choices and tense choices, and modified by the ascribed source of the proposition, modal verbs, report verbs and metalinguistic labels. A hypothesis would be consistent with modals such as would or could, while
an interpretation may use verbs such as *imply* or *interpret* or lexical items of comparison such as *better fit* or *similar results*. Also, the attribution of a proposition using a reporting verb such as *claim* may suggest the relative lack of acceptance of a writer's position by the community when compared to active verbs such as *points out* or *shows*, which reflect the writer's alignment with the attributed proposition (Hyland 2002). Other less congruent expressions of modality, through interpersonal metaphors such as *it is believed*, confer status on a proposition. However, Hunston explains that the identification of writer activity essentially hinges around the verb phrase, as modality is most congruently expressed in the verb phrase of a clause, the unit of analysis in this framework. The appendix provides a working definition of each identified statement type and the corresponding identification cues (see Wu 2005 for a detailed analysis of statement types).

**Results and discussion**

Terms used in the classic Toulmin (1958) model of argumentation provide the context for interpreting the significance of various statement types in this analysis. Toulmin (1958: 97–98) defines *claim* as ‘a conclusion whose merits we are seeking to establish’ and *grounds* as ‘the facts we appeal to as a foundation for the claim’. Essentially, the elements of a claim, supported by relevant grounds, form the backbone of a simple argument. Where relevant, these terms are used to illustrate how certain statement types have contributed to a more- or less-successful argument.

**Categories of statement types used and their role in argumentation**

**World-creating statements**

It is interesting that the low-rated essays show consistently higher occurrences of three categories of statements: focus, hypothetical and recommendation statements. These are what Hunston (2000) calls *world-creating statements*, and their status is such that they are not assessed for their truth-values. The respective percentages for the low-rated and high-rated essays were 9 per cent and 3 per cent.

**Example 1**

Another [solution], suggested by Associate Professor Brenda Yeoh proposes the encouragement and education of children to adopt a worldview without losing sense of who they are. (S12 117)

In this example, the recommendation made is attributed to a source – Associate Professor Brenda Yeoh – and it concludes the writer’s point on whether Singapore is regarded as home by Singaporeans. The suggestion, recommended by the source, points to the possibility of educating children so that they do not lose sense of who they are, even as they adopt a global worldview of things. The recommendation made cannot be verified for its truth-value and, as such, the validity of the grounds on which the claim stands cannot be verified. Thus, it neither strengthens nor weakens the argument of whether Singapore is regarded as home. Frequently occurring statements of such a nature may contribute to the quality of a less-objective script in the eyes of academic assessors.

Toulmin’s (1958) concept of *claim* is a central element in an argument. An interesting pattern is found in such claims made about the topic, which are realised as *hypothesis* in Hunston’s term. This pattern pertains to the kinds of evaluation made in the hypotheses. As claims are established, professional writers may evaluate research-oriented entities or topic-oriented entities. Thetela (1997) identifies the salience of research-oriented evaluation compared to topic-oriented evaluation in professional academic writing. However, in the present study, writers use argument-oriented evaluation (AOE) in their hypothesis statements. AOE involves entities that further the development of an argument and make reference to these entities and evaluate them, as can be seen in Example 2.

**Example 2**

This is a classic example of how language evolved and changed to suit the environment and social context of that time. (S3 15)

In Example 2, the example provided to exemplify an earlier point is positively evaluated as *classic*. 
In other instances, AOE’s are not explicitly labelled as a point or example but as a pronominal this, as seen in Example 3.

Example 3

i One compelling reason for change is the need for a language to adapt itself to the need and realities of the speakers.

ii This is certainly true in my point of view as a language must be able to allow its speakers to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings as well as communicate with one another. (S5 1–2)

In the second sentence in Example 3, what is evaluated as true is the reason or factor for change mentioned in the first sentence. It is an AOE being evaluated as certainly true, although it is not explicitly labelled as a factor other than by the pronominal this. Figure 3 presents a selected list of AOE’s in both the high-rated scripts and the low-rated scripts. Such AOE’s may play a role in reinforcing the writer’s stance as he or she develops claims in arguments.

Figure 3: A selected list of argument-related evaluation in high-rated and low-rated scripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High-rated scripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>However, there was massive influence of the Scandinavian languages on English, in terms of grammar and vocabulary. (S1 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although the Scandinavian influence on English was great but the changes were not particularly dramatic as the words taken were ordinary words. (S1 21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaucer’s own works also had a powerful influence on this development. (S1 52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was inevitable that the presence of the Vikings and the Normans would set in motion changes and additions to Middle English. (S1 97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In fact, the effect of French on Middle English was so strong that approximately 10000 words came into this language between 1250 and 1450. (S1 100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A likely reason for this was that the English speaking population in the 11th and 12th century was mainly the uneducated lower classes. (S2 31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A point to note, however, is that these French borrowings are relatively little since English still ‘continues to do its own things in its own low-level arenas’ [lecturer’s name]. (S5 27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once again, it is evident that the need for English to change stems from the very fact that it ought to adapt itself to the needs and realities of the speakers. (S5 35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the above analysis of Scandinavian and French influence on the English language, the notion that ‘one compelling reason for change is the need of a language to adapt itself to the needs and realities of the speakers’ is apparent and straightforward. (S5 36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>However, despite their large numbers, their influence on the American English language was relatively small. (S6 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and thus it is inevitable their language too had little say in influencing American English. (S6 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In conclusion, it is true that the American language changes are due to the change in the needs and realities of its speakers; in their adaptation and exchange of ideas and cultures with the rest of the world, and within themselves. (S6 53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change is inevitable for a language to remain relevant. (S7 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With emergence of new needs and realities, there was a need for the English language to expand its linguistic resources. (S7 17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This change in language is inevitable in order for to serve its role as a communication medium. (S7 72)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cont …
Low-rated scripts
Together with the Jamaicans and the migrants from the West Indies, they played a major role in the cultural arena with their brand of music (rhythm and blues, soul) and dance (hip hop, reggae). (S17 43)
There is no doubt a compelling need for the English language to be flexible to better serve its purpose as an international language. (S17 63)
However, when the church was flourishing with its power and influence in the early stages of the Middle Ages, it played a significant role in changing the English language. (S20 49)
None can be more significant then the borrowing of French words. (S20 94)
Of more importance are intellectual qualities that contribute to culture as opposed to linguistic origins. (S21 41)
It is inevitable that language will change. (S22 7)
There were many changes made to the language owing to factors such as social, political, economic and ideological changes. [lecturer’s name] (S25 2)
One very important area now and in the future is technology where it gives rise to new words such as Internet. (S25 26)
Hence, to deny that the inevitable need of language to change is independent of the needs and realities facing the speakers is in conceivable in any context. (S26 41)
The movement or migration of Scandinavians into Britain before the Middle English Period saw a change in English language. (S27 20)
The social changes during the Middle English Period has acted as a platform for changes in English language and had in some ways revolutionized the language. (S27 52)

Sub-categories of interpretation statement types

Interpretation-significance
In developing the grounds for arguments, pieces of evidence may need interpretation so that causal factors are identified. Veel and Coffin (1996: 216) explain the difference between simplistic historical recounts and more evaluative historical accounts: simplistic historical recounts are organised in temporal sequences, while in the more sophisticated historical accounts ‘explanation is built up in text time by means of a logical scaffold from which an elaboration of causes or consequences unfolds’. Though the scripts analysed in this study are not history essays, the tracing of historical events and their impact on English-language change is necessary. As such, Veel and Coffin’s description of a more evaluative historical account is relevant here.

Interpretation–significance statements are often used in high-rated essays to draw causal relations between events and situations and to comment on the significance of these events in the context of the arguments. In the case of the essays in this study, this relates to the main reasons for English-language change, as seen in Example 4.

Example 4
i American English was thus prevented from deviating much, with the standardisation of the educated class English.

ii This compelled them to coin new words or borrow words from other languages that could fit their physical reality (S1 22-23).

The use of interpretation-significance statements helps the construal of the writer’s judgment regarding the significance of various factors in language change and, as such, helps develop the writer’s overall position in relation to the question prompt. Interpretation-significance statements are helpful in
developing arguments in response to the task of identifying factors for English-language change in the specified historical period, and they seem more prevalent in the high-rated essays.

**Interpretation-support**

A good argument provides credible pieces of evidence and interprets the significance of this evidence to persuade readers of its validity. Interpretation-support statements make reference to data presented and highlight the effectiveness of the data set in illustrating or supporting a prior proposition made, as in Example 2 above – This is a classic example of how language evolved and changed to suit the environment and social context of that time (S3 15).

Writers of high-rated scripts provide consistent reinforcement of the significance of certain types of evidence presented to support adopted positions. Such statements are identified through the presence of linguistic items such as this illustrates or this shows, where the writer explicitly guides the reader into an evaluation of the validity of certain positions taken. As such, the consistent use of such statement types at different points in the high-rated scripts may help create relatively clearer cues of what the writers are proposing at different junctures in the scripts (see Examples 5 and 6).

**Example 5**

Graddol et al. give some examples like ‘duce, countess (duke, countess), messe, clerk (mass, scholar), and werre, pais (war, peace), [which] could be said to reflect the dominance of the Normans in powerful institutions such as the royal court and the church (Graddol et al 1996: 123). (S12 23)

**Example 6**

i The Great Vowel Shift during the Middle English Period changed the whole vowel system of London English.

ii Even though the modernised English version became more prevalent, each dialect group still retained its own unique characteristics after the Great Vowel Shift. (S2 38, 39)

Example 5 shows how evidence of language change, attributed to Graddol, is further commented on – could be said – to show its significance in the clause. Example 6, taken from a low-rated script, shows how the Great Vowel Shift (GVS) is said to have caused language change in London English. However, there is little evidence to support this statement, nor is there any further comment on the validity of the GVS as a cause of change. Instead, in the second sentence, the writer qualifies the effect of the GVS, limiting it to London English. As such, the argument is not reinforced and consequently weakens the claim.

**Interpretation-mean**

Interpretation-mean involves the writer’s restatement of certain propositions in ways that are simpler or clearer, or in a way where certain focuses are highlighted in accordance with the writer’s aim. It allows the writer to further interpret ideas and put them in perspective for the reader. For example, it may involve the definition of terms or interpreting what a set of data means, as in Example 7.

**Example 7**

This meant that greater vocabulary was needed to cater to this increase in demand for English words. (S1 47)

The category of interpretation-mean is somewhat similar to code glosses in metadiscourse terms (van Kopple 1985). Code glosses aid readers to grasp the writer’s intended meaning in texts. They are usually accompanied by phrases such as X can be defined or in other words. According to Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995), who investigated metadiscourse items in good and poor English as a second language essays, code glosses are infrequently used in such writing. They explain that this is due to the assumption of beginning writers that readers have adequate knowledge or background information to understand the discussion, and thus they seldom give statements that clarify terms or definitions. Perhaps this could also explain the low frequency of interpretation-mean in the present set of scripts. Statements of interpretation-mean in the low-rated scripts frequently involve the definition of terms such as Standard English.
However, the terms defined are not necessarily key terms and, although the definitions may be helpful to readers, they are not crucial in fulfilling the intent of the assignment.

**Interpretation-response**

This category of statements consists of frequently passivised statements, which are attributed to an unidentified source. In this data set, interpretation-response was often used in reporting a source voice other than the writer’s, as in Example 8.

**Example 8**

Some people may think that the food and drink there is delicious, special and not too expensive. (S12 27)

In some cases, these sources may be identified but the processes attributed to them are implicit mental processes (for example, *think, felt, considered*). The validity of these clauses is difficult to ascertain from an observer’s viewpoint, as there is a high level of interpretation of the source information and the interpretations are difficult to verify. Generally, in an academic essay, the quality of being objective is emphasised, and is taught to students in academic writing classes. However, the frequent use of such statements may raise the speculative or subjective quality of a script in the eyes of the assessor, as the writer fails to draw conclusions based on substantiated claims. The interpretation-response statement type is similar in nature to recommendations and hypothetical statements, which may not be readily accepted as strong rationales or evidence in arguments, and therefore carry limited value in the formulation of assertive propositions.

**Facts**

Generally, the provision of facts to support claims enhances an argument. However, the identification of statements of fact in the data set highlighted some interesting ways in which students presented such statements and the potential incongruence between the perceptions of markers and student writers regarding the types of fact required in an argument.

The data present many examples of an exaggerated sense of writer evaluation of the status of a proposition, which may contradict the reader assessment of the same proposition. This inappropriate evaluation by the writer may be due to a lack of awareness of the importance of such evaluation, or a lack of awareness of how to indicate status appropriately, as can be seen in Example 9.

**Example 9**

i According to Glissmeyer, ‘knowledge of the development of the various English systems in Hawaii was almost speculative’. (Glissmeyer 1973)

ii However, that did not stop her from analysing the changes in Hawaii and thus we shall take her research as truth and leave the questioning for future research.

iii As far as the research went, what prompted hapa huole to arise was the government’s action. (S14 27–29)

The proposition in the third sentence, which hypothesises on the origin of the Creole *hapa huole*, is given a status of a truth in the second sentence. However, the phrase *As far as the research went* acts to limit the validity of the factual status of the so-called truth. As such, it complicates the assessment of the status of the proposition. The writer’s exaggerated use of evaluative elements to assess the status of presented propositions may complicate the readers’ identification of the propositional status. This attempt at qualifying propositions may indicate a stage in the development of a more academic style.

Another interesting expression of fact concerns factual information that is accompanied by modal items. Much of what is presented as fact in student work originates from course texts, lecture notes and other reading materials. In other words, propositions presented as fact may actually be the perspective of one author, lecturer or subject expert on that issue or his/her way of defining a concept. It is not unusual for student writers to present these perspectives as fact, as these people are considered authoritative sources.
However, there is a reservation in identifying the proposition as fact for the analyst. Also, these statements of fact are sometimes accompanied by modifying elements, such as modal constructions, as in Example 10, and, as such, complicate the identification of the proposition as a fact.

**Example 10**

i. The history of Middle English is often divided into three periods.

ii. The first would be Early Middle English, from about 1100 to about 1250 and the second would be the Central Middle English period from about 1250 to 1400. (S1 5–8)

In this example, a seemingly factual statement has been modalised and that presents an incongruence between factual content and the tentativeness expressed. It hinders the presentation of the factual status of the proposition that may be necessary for the further development of an effective argument.

Furthermore, the status of fact may not be effectively conveyed when one takes into consideration grammatical errors, as illustrated by Example 11.

**Example 11**

i. Lastly, changing ‘realities’ will also affect language change.

ii. For example, rise of the cowboys and ranches in West America will definitely lend its influence on the change of language,

iii. Previously unheard of terms will be coined and others revised to adjust to the new reality of the cowboys’ way of life. (S6 10–11)

The writer refers to an American historical situation, when the rise of cowboys and ranches contributed to the emergence of new terms. This could be seen as fact, except that there is the use of the modal expressions *will definitely* and *will be coined*. These grammatical items, when read in context, are obviously incorrect, as the events refer to situations in the past. Thus, for student writing, there is the additional factor of grammaticality to consider, unlike professionally published articles where the element of grammatical error is minimised.

The examples given above illustrate how different statement types used in student essays may not prove effective in an argumentative context. Besides these difficulties, the analysis revealed another pattern in the use of statements of fact concerning the type of facts used. The frequency of occurrence of the category of fact is not significantly different in the two sets of scripts (mean = 23 for high-rated essays, and mean = 24 for low-rated essays). However, the occurrence of one type of fact, a list of language data used to illustrate examples of language change, may have been more frequent in the high-rated essays, as in Example 12.

**Example 12**

Examples of some French borrowings during this time include words like garden, market and wage. (S1 15)

The description of statement types within this framework does not differentiate between this type of fact and other types, such as that given in Example 13.

**Example 13**

By 1366, the Parliament was opened with a speech by the Chancellor in English. (S1 38)

The points in Examples 12 and 13 are verifiable to a large extent and, as such, can be identified as fact, given the specifications in the Hunston framework. However, from the comments given by the markers, it seems that statements of fact similar to that in Example 12 are preferred illustrations of how and why the English language changed, compared to other factual statements.

Of the 14 low-rated essays, 12 received comments from the markers relating to the need to provide factual details from language data. For example, in Script 26, four instances of examples were written along the margin. More specifically, one of the points made by the writer of S26 was:
The lack of an expansive range of vocabulary in Old English to satisfy the varying range of functions of the English people after the Norman Conquest led to a chain of events that sparked off numerous borrowings from French as well as Latin in the Middle English period. (S26)

The marker commented, *No examples of these provided.* Other essays had these comments along the margins:

illustrate, more such examples, illustrate CHANGE, needs lots of illustration (S22) but no example of this in your essay (S17)

More detailed comments at the ends of the essays seem to point to the need for factual language data as support for claims. For example, in Script 26, these comments were made:

Although you have provided a very detailed account of the external history of the period under consideration, you haven’t provided many examples of the actual language change that took place as a result of this. This makes this essay rather lopsided, leaning heavily on history but with nothing concrete to show for what these changes were and what the nature of these changes was! [emphasis as in the original] (S26)

Similar comments were found in other essays. In Script 20, the writer claimed that [this antagonism towards the French] gave rise to the revival of the English language; the marker wrote that [this is the really important part and this is what you should focus on with lots of examples of language change. At the end of the essay, the marker made these comments:

Too much focus on external history – hardly any on internal! There is hardly any discussion of how the language changed, how a whole lot of new words were borrowed from the French, reflecting both the operation of centripetal force as well as change in worldview.

A selection of more detailed end-of-essay comments is given in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Selection of marker comments on low-rated scripts**

| Reasonable answer: Could be better with more examples and better linking between paragraphs. (S24) |
| The essay requires you to show and argue that change in language is related to new realities, and it is this that has to be made clear. (S25) |
| Too much focus on external history and its details, not enough on internal history. No examples of language change here have been provided. (S21) |
| You have taken great pains to give considerable details of the historical and political factors that led to the formation of American English. But the answer becomes rather lopsided when you don’t support it with adequate number of examples of language change to illustrate your points. (S17) |
| You are required to discuss the quotation by referring to language changes (in English) during the ME period. (S19) |
| Your essay reads like a patch work of fragments picked up from different parts of the lecture notes and the prescribed readings, with no attempt at coherently arguing for how changes was brought in American English and inadequately supported by examples. (S16) |

Thus, it seems that factual details of historical events and situations that contributed to language change are not sufficient for a convincing answer. Language data akin to those in Example 12 are required to show and illustrate how language has changed in specific, concrete terms. Thus, perhaps a finer distinction within a general category of fact may show a higher level of significant difference between the two sets of scripts, as in the case of interpretation statements.
Implications and conclusion

The observations presented in this paper are specific to one essay prompt in a particular discipline, although the assigned task involved the writing of a general argumentative genre. Generally, the insights gained provide a useful guide to the expressions used by undergraduate writers in developing arguments, and consequently what should be taught in academic writing courses.

Particularly interesting is the apparent preference of markers for one type of statement of fact, namely examples of factual linguistic data. The markers consistently commented negatively on the lack of this type of factual statement in the low-rated scripts. As such, there may be a need to clarify types of information that serve as good evidence to substantiate a task-specific argument.

Another interesting area of difference is in the interpretation category. Within the four interpretation sub-categories, the categories of interpretation-significance and interpretation-support seem more prevalent in the high-rated scripts than the low-rated scripts, while the converse is true for the interpretation-mean and interpretation-response categories. The difference is most pronounced in the interpretation-support category. The frequent use of these statements in the high-rated scripts suggests the importance of such statements in developing good arguments. In such statements, the significance of evidence provided to support claims is highlighted, and the readers are not left to infer the significance for themselves. Thus, it may be necessary to teach student writers to use these statements at appropriate junctures. By using interpretation-support statements, evidence is not merely stated, but is presented in such a manner that the reader is persuasively led to the same conclusion as the writer, by being led to acknowledge the significance of evidence provided. Here, we once again see the importance of ‘the interpersonality and interactivity in academic discourse [of which] evaluativeness undoubtedly constitutes an essential aspect’ (Mauranen and Bondi 2003: 271). The high-rated essays generally conveyed a sense of reinforcement clearly and frequently as the arguments were developed. Interpretation-support statements, which highlight the usefulness of AOEs, also contribute to the strength of an argument as examples, evidence or data are evaluated for their relevance in substantiating certain propositions.

The prevalence of the interpretation-significance category in the high-rated scripts indicates a stronger tendency to draw causal relations between propositions more frequently. The clear indication of cause and effect provides possible reasons to account for certain propositions made in the texts. Students with higher proficiency levels can explore various ways of indicating this rhetorical relation besides the use of the basic subordinator because. The use of interpretation-significance statements realised through a variety of language forms could constitute a teaching point to demonstrate the difference between recounting events and accounting for them coherently. This would allow the student to develop a wider repertoire of language resources to indicate cause and effect relations.

The interpretation-response category occurs frequently in the low-rated scripts. This feature, together with the higher frequency of world-creating statements, may contribute to a higher level of subjectivity in the low-rated essays. Interpretation-response statements are somewhat similar to world-creating statements, as it is difficult to ascertain what human agents thought or felt. The Hunston framework categorises world-creating statements as not tested for their truth-value and thus, if overused, they can contribute to a higher subjectivity in texts. The low-rated scripts present a higher frequency of interpretation-mean statements, resulting mainly from the frequent definitions of terms, although the terms defined are not necessarily the key terms.

Statements of hypothesis and assessment were used in both the high-rated scripts and the low-rated scripts. In a related analysis, which is beyond the scope of this paper, these two statement types were found to be the most frequently moderated for their certainty level. The linguistic resources used present some interesting differences (Wu and Allison 2003), which may indicate the potential for learner writers to temper the level of assertions in statements of hypothesis that are akin to position statements.

The expression of the writer’s opinion, as manifested in the formulation of different statement types, could have contributed, in some degree, to the final argumentative stance of the high-rated scripts and the low-rated scripts in this study. However, the frequency of different statement types constitutes only part of a more complex system of other evaluative resources, including the expression of certainty and the evaluation of value and relevance that contribute to the construal of the evaluative texture of a text. Evaluative meanings can be expressed in multifaceted ways, but rather than wait for comprehensive
definitive research findings, it would be best to highlight progressively the role of language that signals the writer’s opinion as we come to understand its manifestation.

Appendix

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<th>World-reflecting statement types</th>
<th>Description and identification</th>
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| Hypothesis                      | ‘Intermediate between fact and assessment is a category named here interpretation or hypothesis. These are statements that are evaluated by the writer as possibly true.’ (Hunston 2000: 188)  
‘Identification cues: lexical items hypothesis, propose etc.’ (Hunston 1989: 115)  
**Definition:** A hypothesis is a statement that expresses the writer’s position on the issue that is being discussed. The writer proposes a certain way of looking at or explaining an issue. It is similar to claim as defined by Toulmin (1958).  
**Example:** *I think the reason why the English settlers adopted these native American words is because their English language lacks the words to describe and name these flora and fauna.* |
| Fact                            | ‘A fact makes an assertion that is open to verification.’ (Hunston 2000: 187)  
**Definition:** Statements that are presented as true and without contention. They are not modalised. Facts depict events through the use of material processes (eg *the Normans invaded*). Facts define participant X (token) in a statement through some identifying participant Y (value) (eg *she is the head of department*). Facts include information gathered from secondary sources that are presented as evidence for propositions made, for instance, a list of Middle English words to depict the effect of a certain type of change. Factual statements are open to verification. When a statement is presented as a fact, readers are positioned to accept it as such and are not invited to evaluate it for its truth-value. Readers, however, may reject a statement as factually wrong.  
**Example:** *He proactively took action by publishing books on English.* |
| Assessment                       | ‘An assessment does not make an assertion that is open to verification.’ (Hunston 2000: 187)  
**Definition:** Statements that express the writer’s description of properties/attributes of entities/states/events/situations in terms that are not verifiable. This description is in attributive terms depicting the qualitative rather than the quantitative.  
**Example:** *During the Gold Rush, phrases such as ‘stake a claim’ or ‘I strike it rich’ became popular.* |
| Interpretation                   | ‘Intermediate between fact and assessment is a category named here interpretation or hypothesis. These are statements that are evaluated by the writer as possibly true.’ (Hunston 2000: 188)  

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| Interpretation-significance     | ‘Identification cues: reference to data; any one of: modal *must*; comparator such as *same*, *different*; evaluative items such as *problem*; indication of personal assessment such as *we believe that*, *give us confidence that*, *it is clear/ certain that*.’ (Hunston 1989: 115) **Definition:** Statements that make reference to data and that highlight the relevance of data from the writer’s point of view. This category also includes statements that highlight the writer’s expression of the causal relationship between events/situations/processes. **Examples:**  
  a) *American English was thus prevented from deviating much, with the standardisation of the educated class English.*  
  b) *This compelled them to coin new words or borrow words from other languages that could fit their physical reality.* |
| Interpretation-mean             | ‘Identification cues: reference to data; projecting verb eg *show*, *mean* or *similar.*’ (Hunston 1989: 115) **Definition:** Interpretation-mean involves the writer’s restatement of certain propositions in ways that are simpler or clearer or in a way where certain focuses are highlighted in accordance with the writer’s aim. For example, it involves the definition of terms for interpreting what a set of data means. **Example:** *This meant that greater vocabulary was needed to cater to this increase in demand for English words.* |
| Interpretation-support          | ‘Identification cues: reference to data; lexical items *in*consistent with, *not* support’ (Hunston 1989: 115) **Definition:** Statements that make reference to data presented and highlight the effectiveness of that set of data in illustrating or supporting a prior proposition made. **Example:** *This is highlighted by the English Language.* |
| Interpretation-response         | These statements usually have a mental verb in the independent clause. They are also frequently expressed in the passive form. **Definition:** The category of interpretation-response consists of statements that make propositions concerning the mental activities of human agents. This includes the way people think, feel or believe with reference to certain issues being discussed. Basically, interpretation-response statements construct propositions from the perspective of what the participants feel or think rather than do. **Example:** *Thomas Jefferson, a chief motivator behind the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, a clarion call to freedom, felt that the English language has indeed come a long way since the founding of Jamestown and Plymouth.* |
World-creating statement types | Description and identification
---|---
Hypothetical | ‘… a writer has the choice of making a hypothetical world, which is simply assumed or hypothesised and is not tested in relation to the actual world.’(Hunston 2000: 189)
**Definition:** Statements that convey a state that is not reflective of the real world or ‘a hypothetical world … not tested in relation to the actual world’ (Hunston 2000: 188). Certain conditions that are non-existent or not real are set up as hypothetical.
**Example:** Thus if the French language had never been viewed in a negative light or if the occurrence of the Black Death had not elevated the status of the English language, the development of Middle English might have been markedly different from what has been shown.

Recommendation | ‘Identification cues: modal verbs ought, should, lexical item require, need etc.’(Hunston 1989: 116)
**Definition:** Statements that suggest that a certain course of action should be taken.
**Example:** However, one must be open-minded before he/she can learn to perceive and appreciate them.

Reference Statements | Description and identification
---|---
‘Identification cues: reference to aim, purpose etc; discourse or self reference.’(Hunston 1989: 116)
**Definition:** Statements that indicate the organisation of the text.
**Example:** Thus, it seems fitting to be discussed here, when considering the adaptations of language in America.

Notes
1 The General Paper is an English paper offered at the General Certificate of Education, AO level.
2 Emphasis conveyed by the underlining is presented as in the original scripts.
3 S1 denotes script number and subsequent numerals denote clause numbers within the script.
4 Emphasis conveyed by the underlining is presented as in the original scripts.

References


