



Authorial Presence in Undergraduate Project Reports in Nigeria

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Outline

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- Introduction: Defining concepts
- Past work
- Final year project report as genre
- Aims of the study
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Defining terms 1

- Academic Discourse: Common Practices and Shared Epistemologies
- Knowledge Construction: Collaborative and Cumulative process
- Interactions: **Evaluation** (hedge, booster, attitude markers, self mention) & **Engagement** (reader pronoun, directives, questions, shared knowledge)
- Labels: Evaluation (Hunston & Thompson, 2000); Stance (Hyland, 2005); Appraisal (Martin, 2000); Identity (Ivanic 1998); metadiscourse (Vande-Kopple, 1985)

Defining Terms 2

- Academic Communities: Groups with shared Discursive Practices
- Authorial Voice: Writer's Distinctive Presence in Text
- Voices: 'Solipsistic'; 'unaverred'; and 'unattributed' (Groom 2000) . These are all difficulties in voicing
- Stance: A Writer's voice in text; shows his Position to Existing Knowledge Claims; his evaluation of
- Stance Markers: Hedges, Boosters and
- Research Spaces: The Writer versus Other Writers/Source versus Authors/ Readers

Introduction 1

- Hyland (2009) defines academic discourse as the ways of thinking and using language in the academy.
- Characteristics: impersonal, unassertive, politeness, minimisation of self, maximisation of other(s) but...
- Genres: major and minor e.g. theses (BA, MA PHD), research articles; lectures, and seminars See Schmied (2014) for a comprehensive list.
- Major functions: To construct **knowledge**; to construct **social roles** of academics and to create **identities** of self and group.

Introduction 2

- The genres and registers of academic discourse pose significant challenges for many students.
- They are expected to transit from a mono-vocal position to a multi-vocal position.
- Students need to know the trade of argumentation and reasoning; know the art of negotiation of knowledge.
- Often, this is daunting for many students who are unfamiliar with the resources of language required.

Past Work

- There is a substantial amount of research in this relatively new field of study.
- Major players are many; K. Hyland; B. Douglas; S. Hunston; G. Thompson; S. Hood; J. Swales; R. Macintyre; J. Schmied; A. Mauranen; P. G.Meyer; J.Holmes; S. Conrad & D. Biber; M. Charles; W. L. Chaffe
- And many more; this list only scratches the surface

The Final Year Project

- The final year project report is one of the undergraduate genres and the most ambitious of them all.
- The purposes are “ to assess students’ abilities to apply theories and methods learned in their courses ... (Hyland 2009).
- Many cannot cope with the independent and systematic nature of writing the project.
- The alternatives are: plagiarism and the use of ‘academic vendors’.

Aims

- To examine the linguistic devices that final year undergraduate students in Nigeria employ to negotiate meaning and establish their arguments in the project reports.
- To identify similarities and differences in the methods used in establishing authorial presence across disciplinary boundaries and contexts.

Method 1

- Undergraduate project reports between 2010 and 2014 in the academic fields of Biochemistry, Agriculture, Business Administration, Economics, English, Law, International Studies and Diplomacy, and Mass Communication.
- So far, the sample consists of **fourteen** (14) individual project reports selected from all five faculties. And it contains a total of **92, 449** words.

Method 2

- Population was stratified i.e. fields of study, as well as academic competence (A essays)
- Raw reports: collected, digitised & proof read
- Sections: Lit. reviews & Discussion/conclusions
- So far 92,449 words collected as follows:
- Biochemistry 8,397; Agriculture 8,686,
Economics 18,028; Mass Comm. 7,791,
Business Admin. 9,664; English 11,040,
Inter. Studies 24,480; Law 4,362.

Method 3

- Data were searched for indications of writers' stance using Antconc.
- The search was based on an existing inventory of 172 linguistic items of stance i.e. hedges and boosters compiled from earlier studies (Holmes (1988) Hyland (1996) and Milton (1997) and others.

Sample writing: Law

- ...it is now **clear** that
- armed conflict has **always** been with man...
- And although change **could** either be retrogressive or progressive
- all keen watchers of the sector **will** agree that the change ... is a progressive one.
- ... and **the fact that** the international court of justice arrived
- This has **obviously** fuelled the feelings of insecurity by

Sample Writing: Science

- it is estimated that about 75 percent of
- they believe that it is the wisdom of
- orthodox medicine seems to neglect....
- The results **indicated** that
- The studies **showed** that the topsoil
- This may be attributed to the low mobility ...
- It can be inferred that

Total Hedges and Boosters found in the corpus

CATEGORY	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
Hedges	1094	61.39
Boosters	688	38.61
Total	1782	100

Sample high frequency stance markers across the disciplines

STANCE MARKERS	SCIENCES		SOCIAL SCIENCES			ARTS		LAW	Total freq.
	Bio-chem	Agric	Econs	Mass Comm	Bus Admin	Eng	ISD	Law	
About	9	6	12	20	14	18	22	1	102
Could	1	5	4	2	17	15	19	9	72
However	11	6	33	10	12	16	25	3	116
May	15	21	20	15	24	15	17	3	130
Most	28	8	11	15	17	23	21	2	125
Often	11	0	5	2	5	10	15	0	47
Possible	3	2	5	1	5	17	14	4	51
Should	0	10	27	9	35	10	26	7	124
Will	1	7	81	10	24	20	8	11	162
Would	1	2	28	9	20	6	48	2	116

Disciplinary Differences

Disciplines	No. of words	% corpus	No. of hedges	%	No. of boosters	%
Bio-chem.	8,397	9.08	102	9.32	31	4.50
Agriculture	8,686	9.39	83	7.59	39	5.67
Economics	18,028	19.50	161	14.72	121	17.59
Mass Communication	7,791	8.43	101	9.23	74	10.76
Business Administration	9,664	10.45	174	15.90	96	13.95
English	11,040	11.94	179	16.36	117	17.00
International Studies	24,480	26.48	258	23.58	168	24.42
Law	4,362	4.72	36	3.29	42	6.10
Total	92,449	100	1094	100	688	100

Preliminary results 1

- The study revealed a total of 110 items of stance.
- The result shows that the student academics (novice writers) used more hedges (1094) than boosters (688).
- The immediate implication is that the writers were more cautious of their arguments, more uncertain and doubtful of their claims and were hesitant to fully commit to both their arguments and those of others.

Preliminary results 2

- The levels of engagement and involvement with their audience is low (impression).
- The results also demonstrated preference for certain stance markers and along disciplinary lines.
- Students in the sciences tend to hedge rather than boost their claims, thus reflecting a degree of uncertainty in presenting their observations as likely results. This is unlike students of law who boost more than they hedge.

Preliminary results 3

- The rhetorical differences across disciplines seems to suggest that the extent of commitment to claims manifested depended on disciplinary cultures or conventions of argumentation/knowledge construction
- But individual or even social factors of acceptable methods of interaction are likely factors.
- The study also suggests that the level of stance-taking across disciplines differs.

Questions to ponder

- Do novice writers in reality employ hedges whenever they are uncertain of a particular statement and claim, and use boosters whenever they are confident of their claim and statement?
- Is the perceived stance a product of unconscious choices since there is a general lack of awareness of academic literacy on stance, by students and teachers alike in academic communities in contexts as Nigeria.

Recommendations

- There is need to raise awareness on academic literacy as text
- Pedagogical as well as curricular interventions are needed
- Students to be made aware of their crucial roles in knowledge construction and be prepared to perform them

Next Steps

- To enlarge corpus to a min. of 200, 00 words
- Re-search corpus to validate preliminary results obtained
- To compare results to those in the literature & other comparable corpora
- To delineate individual, social and disciplinary features of stance
- To use interview & questionnaire tools to strengthen some conclusions

Thank you for your attention!

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