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Seminar 70
"Empirical Approaches to Discipline, Culture and Identity in Academic Discourse"
(Josef Schmied, Marina Bondi)

Content and wording of university course descriptions

Sara Gesuato

ABSTRACT

Within academic discourse, academic course descriptions (ACDs) are informational-regulatory texts: they orientate students and impose rules on them. The analysis of 80 ACDs representative of 8 disciplines (8,380 words) shows that their communicative goals are realized through the choice of topics dealt with, and through the representation of processes and the entities involved. Thus, ACDs outline the content, method and background of courses (referential function), but also their logistics/requirements and goals/outcomes (conative function). The focus of the ACD is seemingly more on what the course is about (referential function) than who it is for or by (conative function): the course, its content and activities are more frequently mentioned than the students and the teacher, and these participants are hardly ever represented as direct interlocutors. However, the ubiquitous simple present and *will*-future, which authoritatively represent events as non-negotiable arrangements, serves the same purpose as deontic modality. Overall, ACDs present courses not as the product of teachers' and students' joint efforts, but as self-determined entities responsible for their policies and content, which mediate between the teacher and the students by avoiding the confrontation implicit in the imposition of rules by one onto the others.

INTRODUCTION

Academic discourse studies investigate how scholars represent, validate and disseminate their research findings (e.g. Swales 1990, Bhatia 1993, Myers 2000, Bondi 2004, Diani 2004, Römer 2005, Soler 2007, D'Angelo 2009, Grazzi 2009), how novices are socialized into the interactional practices of academic communication (e.g. Swales & Feak 1994/2004, 2000, Tognini-Bonelli & Del Lungo Camiciotti 2005, Hyland & Bondi 2006, Flottum, Dahl & Kinn 2006, Bruce 2008, Gotti 2009, Hyland 2009, Hyland & Diani 2009), and also how academics develop communicative practices in handling professional and social relationships, and in carrying out administrative tasks (e.g. Swales 1988, Fairclough 1993, Räisänen 1999, Trix & Psenka 2003, Giannoni 2006, Gesuato 2008, Gea Valor & Inigo Ros 2009, Bernardini, Ferraresi & Gaspari 2009).

This paper is meant to contribute to the third line of research by examining academic course descriptions (ACDs). These texts qualify as a hybrid institutional genre, partly housekeeping and partly gatekeeping (Srikant Sarangi, personal communication 2009). They serve two communicative purposes: a logistical-informational one (i.e. conveying information to prospective attendees about the contents and design of courses) and a pedagogical-regulatory one (i.e. setting out non-negotiable rules and requirements for access to and participation in courses). The

analysis focuses on how the content, structure and wording of ACDs are influenced by their twofold goal, partly orientational/informational and partly directive/regulatory.

DATA

The data analysed comes from 80 ACDs, representative of 8 disciplines, collected on the Internet with the following search queries: "course description" AND "biology/ geography/ journalism/ law/ literature/ music/ psychology/ statistics". The original texts comprise 54 one-paragraph long ACDs and 26 longer ones. The former outline the main topics and goals of courses and optionally refer to their policies. The latter – divided into such sections as format, grading, contact details and assignments – provide detailed information about the content, structure and policies of courses, and optionally about their logistics; e.g.:

(1) **LIT 210(3-0-3)**
Children's Literature
This course defines the nature and function of children's literature by locating an examination of its history, genres, trends, and controversies in both an understanding of children's cognitive and imaginative response to reading and an exploration of culturally constructed images of and for children. The course offers methodologies for critical reading of a variety of children's texts and for selecting literature appropriate for a number of child-oriented programs. The course offers opportunities for observation and participation in story hours and other literature-based activities in locations such as child care facilities and public libraries.
PR: ENG 123 (Lit-01)

(2) **Introduction to Russian Literature**
Daily Assignments for the course - Fall, 2002 (including links to individual authors and works)

General Information about the Course:
LTRN 101 "Introduction to Russian Literature." An introduction to the works of major 19th and 20th century Russian writers (Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gorky, Solzhenitsyn and others), including a discussion of how Russian literature is translated into other languages and other media (such as film, music and art). All readings are in ENGLISH.
This course has been designed especially for first-year college students, but it is open to all students. The course may be used towards fulfilling the *Humanities Distribution Requirement*. This course also may be used towards fulfilling the requirements for the *European Studies Minor*.
The purpose of the course is twofold: to give students a basic introduction to Russian literature and to develop in them an appreciation of good literature. To meet these goals we will talk about literature in general and different ways of approaching a literary work, we will also analyze an array of Russian literature from both the 19th and 20th centuries. We will read not only prose, but poetry and drama as well; we will also read some literary criticism. The course will introduce students to several special topics, such as 1) problems of literary translation, 2) adapting literary works to radio, TV and film, 3) the current literary scene in Russia.

I. Required reading
A.S.Pushkin. *Eugene Onegin*. Penguin, 1979 [novel in verse]
N.V.Gogol, et al. *The Government Inspector and Other Russian Plays*. Penguin Classics, 1991. […]

We will also read some poems of various poets; excerpts from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*; excerpts from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* […] The cost of these Xeroxed materials is approximately $7. This collection of readings will be available for purchase by October 1st in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures office, top floor Carnegie. Other handouts (class notes, study questions, etc.)--free! You should purchase a large three ring binder for these materials.

II. Media Presentations:
Performance "Eugene Onegin" (video of the opera),
movie excerpts: "The Inspector General" (US and Russian versions) […]
videos on the lives and works of various authors and other things...as available.

III. Lectures:
Brief lectures on literary theory--based mainly on the text by R. Wellek and A. Warren and that by R. Seldon (listed below). Also several brief lectures on special topics such as: Russian literary tradition; general characteristics of prose and poetry analysis; problems of translation; literature and the media; Socialist Realism; the current literary scene in Russia.

IV. Suggested Readings:
(Check the library or the bookstore for copies)
R. Wellek and A. Warren. *Theory of Literature*.
R. Selden. A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory […]. (Lit-04)

For this study I considered the complete texts of the short ACDs and the main sections of the longer ones (identifiable by such titles as *Course description*, *Aims* or *Objectives, Course structure*). As Table 1 shows, the corpus consists of 8,380 words, the average length of an ACD being about 105 words.

Discipline	Short ACDs	Long ACDs	Global words	Shortest ACD	Longest ACD	Average words per ACD
Biology	9	1	990	32	154	99
Geography	8	2	1,033	26	404	103.3
Journalism	8	2	932	36	160	93.2
Law	5	5	1,521	52	328	152.1
Literature	3	7	1,253	50	223	125.3
Music	7	3	1,217	53	277	121.7
Psychology	6	4	714	35	198	71.4
Statistics	8	2	720	41	168	72
Total	54	26	8,380	--	--	104.75

Table 1: Distribution of long and short ACDs across subcorpora, length of subcorpora in number of words, longest and shortest ACDs, and average length of ACDs in number of words

My mainly qualitative analysis of the ACDs comprised: (a) a classification of their content (i.e. recurrent units of information were revealed by repeated readings of the texts); (b) a description of the semantic-syntactic encoding of the events represented, and the participants mentioned (i.e. the transitivity of predicates, and the syntactic functions and semantic roles of their arguments were manually labelled); and (c) an outline of the tone of the texts (i.e. the strength of assertions and impositions was

assessed on the basis of recurrent tense and modality choices). The research goal was to outline the authors' conceptualization of courses and their orientation towards their readership.

DATA ANALYSIS

The ACDs convey information about the content of courses, their goals/outcomes, logistics, methods and/or their disciplinary backgrounds.

Content comprises topics to cover and issues to address in class, either encoded as the object of others' action or included in presentative constructions; e.g.:

(3) "This class examines the relationship of numbers to news stories" (Journ-07; here and elsewhere: my underlining)

(4) "A study of the structural organization and processes of eukaryotic cells. Topics of discussion will include regulation of transcription, gene product processing and transport, organelle biogenesis and function […] and cell interactions" (Bio-06)

Goals are envisaged educational achievements – often signalled by such phrases as *so as to, is designed to* – while outcomes are end-results of events – such as understanding or learning – possibly represented as consequences of actions performed by courses (e.g. *deepen an appreciation of X, offer an opportunity to do X*); e.g.:

(5) This course will bring an understanding of what it means to be "urban" […] (Geo-02)

(6) Students […] will be expected to discuss, analyze, and solve these problems (Law-02)

(7) "Through two main projects […] students become fluent in the language, workflow and rigorous demands of Internet publishing" (Journ-03)

Logistics comprises the organizational and technical aspects of courses, and their policies. It specifies what courses do or do not involve (e.g. "assignments will be graded pass/fail"; "offered in the Spring semester") and also what they offer to or impose on students (e.g. "requirement", "available"); e.g.:

(8) "Course is repeatable as topic changes" (Lit-02)

(9) "Students are strongly advised to read as many as possible of the following works in advance: Nabokov *Despair; Lolita;* Bunin *The Dark Avenues* […]" (Lit-05)

Method is the approach adopted to study the object of courses (i.e. to conduct lessons and/or take part in them) and may include reference to procedural knowledge or selective attention paid to a particular aspect or part of a general topic; e.g.:

(10) "Students examine a variety of musical genres, develop critical listening habits and apply concepts presented in class through keyboard demonstrations" (Mus-03)

(11) "The emphasis in this course is on developing practical expertise in using computers for music research […] Humdrum provides tools for extracting, transforming, linking, classifying, contextualizing, comparing, and analysing music-related information" (Mus-05)

Background information provides a context for the topic of courses and/or their disciplines – it may highlight the relevance of courses to the readership's interests, outline the scientific domains to be explored in class and/or introduce key concepts relevant to courses; e.g.:

(12) "<u>Fifty percent of the global population and 80% of Americans live in cities. Urban geography is the social science that investigates the integration of built forms, human interactions and the environmental aspects of places</u>" (Geo-02)

(13) "<u>Our environment is dynamic and ever-changing, constantly modified by natural processes and human activities</u>" (Geo-07)

As Table 2 shows, most ACDs (97.5%) refer to the content of courses and many also to the logistics and methods involved (76.3% and 61.3%, respectively). Envisaged goals or outcomes are mentioned in less than half of the corpus, while background information is found only in 23.8% of the ACDs.

Discipline	No. of ACDs referring to				
	Course content	Goal/outcome	Logistics	Method	Background
Biology	10	6	8	5	2
Geography	10	3	7	6	3
Journalism	9	3	7	6	3
Law	9	5	6	8	5
Literature	10	4	7	9	5
Music	10	8	9	5	1
Psychology	10	3	10	5	9
Statistics	10	4	7	5	0
Total	78 (97.5%)	36 (45%)	61 (76.3%)	49 (61.3%)	19 (23.8%)

Table 2: Frequency and distribution of content categories across ACDs

REPRESENTATION OF ENTITIES

Four types of entities are mentioned in an ACD: the course, its content, its participants and the participants' planned activities.

When referred to as curriculum components, **courses** are represented as doers (i.e. agents responsible for educational contents and goals) and are syntactically encoded as thematic subject NPs of action verbs in the active voice (66.3%); e.g.:

(14) "This course <u>examines</u> the sociocultural context of human behavior […]" (Psych-05)

(15) "<u>Introduces</u> psychology bases of instructional systems" (Psych-07)

Discipline	Course as			
	Doer: ACDs (tokens)	Experiencer: ACDs (tokens)	Patient: ACDs (tokens)	Other: ACDs (tokens)
Biology	8 (13)	6 (10)	5 (9)	1 (2)
Geography	7 (15)	2 (4)	2 (3)	0 (0)
Journalism	7 (9)	1 (1)	1 (1)	1 (1)
Law	6 (9)	2 (2)	1 (1)	3 (3)
Literature	8 (14)	1 (1)	1 (3)	1 (1)
Music	8 (15)	3 (6)	2 (2)	3 (3)
Psychology	5 (10)	1 (1)	2 (2)	0 (0)
Statistics	4 (5)	4 (7)	3 (6)	2 (2)
Total	53 [66.3%] (90)	21 [26.3%] (33)	17 [21.3%] (27)	11 [13.8%] (12)

Table 3: Semantic representation of courses

When referred to as events to be run, courses are represented as entities affected by others' actions (patients) – showing up as object NPs of active action verbs or subject

NPs of passive action verbs (21.3%) – or alternatively as carriers of properties (experiencers) – realized as subject NPs of relational verbs (26.3%); e.g.:

(16) "This <u>is</u> the first course in a two-semester sequence on data analysis" (Psych-04)

(17) "In addition to <u>covering</u> libel law and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), course <u>encompasses</u> issues related to radio employment contracts, trademarks […]" (Law-08)

(18) "If demand arises a crash course <u>may be run</u> during vacation […]" (Stat-08)

(19) "This course <u>has been designed</u> especially for first-year college students […]" (Lit-04)

Alternative encoding options account for 13.8% of the data (see Table 3).

The **content of courses** can be represented as a patient – syntactically rendered as the object NP of an action verb in the active voice, the subject NP of an action verb in the passive voice, or the object of a preposition – or, alternatively, as an experiencer – syntactically encoded as the subject or object NP of a relational verb; e.g.:

(20) "We will survey <u>a wide range of musical examples, Western and non-Western, ancient and contemporary</u> […]" (Mus-09)

(21) "This course provides an introduction to <u>landscape-forming processes and landforms</u> […]" (Geo-08)

(22) "<u>TOPICS</u> INCLUDE <u>FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTIONS, GRAPHS, STEM-AND-LEAF DISPLAYS, BOXPLOTS, SCATTER DIAGRAMS</u> […]" (Stat-09)

(23) "This course is a systematic study of <u>the elements of the physical environment (e.g. weather, climate, landforms, water, soil and vegetation</u> […]" (Geo-10)

As shown in Table 4, the two most frequent semantic encoding options for the course content are patient, relevant to 88% of the ACDs (with 147 tokens), and experiencer, relevant to 47% of the ACDs (with 33 tokens).

Discipline	Course content as			
	Doer: ACDs (tokens)	Experiencer: ACDs (tokens)	Patient: ACDs (tokens)	Other: ACDs (tokens)
Biology	0 (0)	6 (6)	9 (20)	0 (0)
Geography	0 (0)	1 (1)	9 (21)	0 (0)
Journalism	0 (0)	3 (3)	8 (22)	1 (1)
Law	1 (1)	4 (4)	9 (25)	0 (0)
Literature	1 (2)	2 (3)	9 (38)	0 (0)
Music	0 (0)	6 (9)	10 (30)	1 (1)
Psychology	0 (0)	5 (7)	9 (25)	0 (0)
Statistics	0 (0)	7 (8)	8 (12)	0 (0)
Total	2 [2.5%] (3)	34 [42.5%] (41)	71 [88.8%] (193)	2 [2.5%] (2)

Table 4: Representation of the course content

Students can be cast in various semantic roles (see Table 5). When represented as doers (21.3%), they appear to be following others' directions, and are encoded as subject NPs of active action verbs or as object NPs of the preposition *by*; e.g.:

(24) "Students <u>examine</u> a variety of musical genres […]" (Mus-03)

(25) "[…] you <u>will use</u> a personal computer […]" (Mus-08)

(26) "Students should be ready <u>to engage</u> in discussions of mode and invention, of genre and structure, and intent and execution" (Lit-06)

As recipients (22.5%), students are presented as beneficiaries of courses or target addressees, and encoded as object NPs of the preposition *for*, as object NPs of active action verbs or as subject NPs of passive action verbs or of active relational verbs; e.g.:

(27) "This sequence is designed <u>for graduate students</u> [sic] Psychology. Graduate students from other disciplines <u>are welcome</u> […]" (Psych-04)

(28) "The module <u>introduces students</u> to Social Psychology" (Psych-09)

Discipline	Students as				
	Doers: ACDs (tokens)	*Recipients: ACDs (tokens)*	*Experiencers: ACDs (tokens)*	*Patients: ACDs (tokens)*	*Other: ACDs (tokens)*
Biology	5 (6)	3 (3)	6 (7)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Geography	1 (2)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Journalism	0 (0)	4 (4)	4 (6)	1 (2)	0 (0)
Law	3 (5)	3 (6)	4 (5)	1 (1)	0 (0)
Literature	1 (1)	2 (5)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Music	4 (8)	2 (4)	4 (5)	2 (4)	1 (1)
Psychology	1 (1)	2 (4)	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Statistics	2 (4)	1 (1)	4 (6)	1 (1)	0 (0)
Total	17 [21.3%] (27)	18 [22.5%] (28)	24 [30%] (31)	5 [6.3%] (8)	1 [1.3%] (1)

Table 5: Semantic representation of students

As experiencers (30%), students are cast in the role of participants involved in the achievement of learning goals – encoded as subject NPs of verbs expressing conscious, involuntary processes – or alternatively as the target of directions – encoded as subject NPs of verbs expressing relations or involuntary processes; e.g.:

(29) "Students […] <u>Understand</u> the […] methods of statistics inference […]" (Stat-02)

(30) "[…] you <u>need to be comfortable</u> with math at the level of high-school […]" (Stat-10)

Finally, students are represented as patients when the logistics of courses is being discussed (6.3%). In such cases, they are syntactically encoded as object NPs of active action verbs or as subject NPs of passive action verbs; e.g.:

(31) "I <u>will assign</u> <u>team members</u> based on an analysis of skill […] factors" (Journ-02)

(32) "Students […] <u>will be graded</u> by a combination of final examination, class participation, class debate and a field research project" (Law-09)

Discipline	Teacher as			
	Doer: ACDs (tokens)	*Experiencer: ACDs (tokens)*	*Patient: ACDs (tokens)*	*Other: ACDs (tokens)*
Biology	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)
Geography	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Journalism	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Law	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (3)	1 (1)
Literature	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Music	0 (0)	1 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Psychology	1 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (1)
Statistics	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total	2 [2.5%] (3)	1 [1.3] (2)	3 [3.8%] (5)	2 [2.5%] (2)

Table 6: Semantic representation of the teacher

Teachers are hardly ever mentioned on their own (see Table 6), and rarely encoded in the first person; e.g.:

(33) "I present the general linear model with particular emphasis on exploratory data analysis, contrast analysis, residual analysis, and structural models" (Psych-04)

(34) Also, some guest lecturers can be invited to enrich the content of the course on specific topics" (Law-03)

Students and teachers may be mentioned together (see Table 7), and represented as volitional participants engaged in joint deliberate acts or experiences, thus showing up as subject NPs of active action verbs, or alternatively encoded as possessive adjectives qualifying the activity they are engaged in; e.g.:

(35) "We will begin with a survey of global electoral geography before turning to the geo-history of voting in the United States" (Geo-03)

(36) "Taken together, Physical and Environmental Geography help us to understand how natural and human processes drive constant changes in the environments we live in" (Geo-07)

(37) "Our proximate goal will be to examine some of the more important theoretical frameworks that have been proposed as avenues toward understanding cultural evolution" (Mus-04)

| Discipline | Teacher and students as | | |
	Doers: ACDs (tokens)	Experiencers: ACDs (tokens)	Other: ACDs (tokens)
Biology	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Geography	1 (1)	1 (1)	0 (0)
Journalism	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Law	3 (6)	0 (0)	1 (1)
Literature	4 (11)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Music	2 (2)	0 (0)	1 (2)
Psychology	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Statistics	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total	10 [12.5%] (20)	1 [1.3%] (1)	2 [2.5%] (3)

Table 7: Semantic representation of the teacher and students together

| Discipline | Study activity | | |
	Experiencer: ACDs (tokens)	Patient: ACDs (tokens)	Other: ACDs (tokens)
Biology	3 (3)	6 (7)	1 (1)
Geography	3 (4)	4 (6)	0 (0)
Journalism	1 (2)	1 (1)	1 (1)
Law	1 (1)	3 (3)	2 (3)
Literature	2 (4)	2 (2)	3 (6)
Music	1 (2)	1 (1)	0 (0)
Psychology	5 (8)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Statistics	2 (5)	3 (3)	0 (0)
Total	18 [22.5%] (29)	20 [25%] (23)	7 [8.8%] (11)

Table 8: Semantic representation of the study activity

The **study activity** carried out by the students and/or teacher may also be mentioned in the ACD. When encoded as a deverbal noun, it is represented either as a patient – showing up as the subject NP of a passive action verb or as the direct object NP of an active action verb – or alternatively as an experiencer – showing up as the

complement of a relational verb, the object of a preposition, the object of a relational verb or as part of a text segment with no predicate (see Table 8); e.g.:

(38) "We will begin <u>with a survey</u> of global electoral geography" (Geo-03)

(39) "This course <u>provides</u> <u>an introduction</u> to landscape-forming processes […]" (Geo-08)

(40) "This course <u>is a systematic study</u> of the elements of the physical environment" (Geo-10)

(41) "<u>A general overview</u> of major theories […] and principles in psychology" (Psych-08)

(42) "<u>Close textual analysis will be complemented</u> by consideration of the broader historical and cultural context" (Lit-05)

TONE

The projected events mentioned in the ACDs, including the conditions students are supposed to abide by, are represented with the certainty of scheduled arrangements. This sense of predetermination is conveyed by the ubiquity of the simple present tense and *will*-future, and the scarcity of modal expressions (epistemic modality is found in 2 ACDs, and deontic modality in 14), which together express certainty; e.g.:

(43) "This course <u>is not a substitute</u> for BIOL 110, 220 or 221 <u>or a prerequisite</u> for other science courses" (Bio-07)

(44) "FACULTY AND/OR STUDENT <u>WILL SELECT</u> A CURRENT EDITION" (Journ-10)

(45) "[…] students <u>can</u> easily consult the didactical materials […], which makes [sic] <u>possible</u> both for students and staff members to take it from distance […] The best essays […] <u>can</u> be published in the web site […] the best students <u>could</u> benefit of a field trip […] a [sic] MP of the Province of Bozen/Bolzano <u>can</u> be invited […]" (Law-03)

(46) "students <u>may not receive</u> credit for both biology 4622 and Biology 6622" (Bio-06)

(47) "Students interested in enrolling in a 298 seminar <u>must first obtain</u> a PTE (Petition to Enroll) number" (Bio-10)

Such recurrent choices lend authoritativeness and credibility to the voices behind the texts – the impersonal certainty with which information is conveyed leaves no room for negotiation, and suggests that courses are well-organized – but at the same time safeguard the readership's negative face – the impression being that these events are established by some external source, and not being deliberately imposed.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The frequency with which the various types of content categories recur in the ACDs positively correlates with the informational-regulatory function of the texts. An outline of the content of courses is relevant to most of the texts (97.5%), and is in line with the name of the genre (i.e. course descriptions), which identifies the topic and main goal of the ACDs. At the same time, the complex nature of the events being described requires that reference be made to organizational matters (76.3%). Also, because courses play an educational role for their addressees, reference is frequently made to the approaches adopted by teachers (61.3%). The envisaged goals or outcomes of courses, which are harder to predict because not completely under the course designers' control and may be subject to updates – are less frequently mentioned (45%). Finally, information on the disciplinary backgrounds of courses – relevant more to the actual practice of instruction per se than to the description of courses – is found in a

minority of the texts (27%).

The entities mentioned in the ACDs are syntactically-semantically represented in accordance with the roles they play for the interactants. As something decided on by the teacher, the course content is mostly represented either as the object of somebody's action (88.8%) or as the carrier of some property that describes it (42.5%). The study activity – the course of action that students and teachers participate and engage in – is represented mainly as a patient or an experiencer (25% and 22.5%, respectively). Students are cast in a variety of roles: as experiencers of learning goals (30%), recipients of offers (22.5%), agents performing assigned tasks (21.3%) and patients directed by others (6.3%). The teacher – although responsible for the content and structure of courses – is rarely mentioned by themself, and not always accurately represented: as a patient (3.8%) or doer (2.5%). The teacher and students are occasionally mentioned together, and mostly represented as doers (15%).

Of the entities represented in the ACDs, courses are the most frequent and prominent: they are often attributed agent-like properties, as if they were directly and intentionally in charge of courses. On the other hand, students and teachers are marginalized: they are infrequently mentioned in the ACDs, and rarely represented as direct interlocutors (i.e. with *I* and *you*), even if they are the communication participants and are responsible co-constructing courses. Such patterns may partly be due to the official nature of the texts – which present academic institutions' educational offers to the public at large – but may also constitute negative politeness strategies for downtoning the directive force of the texts. The ACDs present definite arrangements as not susceptible to change and unconditionally valid. But the representation of courses as external, personified participants responsible for the assignment of roles and tasks turns them into mediators, or buffers, between teachers and students; in addition, the representation of teachers and students as remote third parties obscures the fact that these are direct interactants, the former imposing requirements on the latter. These communicative choices effectively mitigate the imposition coming from the texts.

The ACDs are oriented toward two communicative-interactional goals: clarity and efficiency. Being subject to rigid space constraints, they focus on what is relevant and useful for the running of courses: information on the content, structure and logistics of courses is meant to prevent misunderstandings, while information on course policies prepares students to deal with courses by raising expectations to be met. Also, the widespread use of the simple present tense and *will*-future, and the limited use of epistemic modality convey credibility to the text authors: authoritative voices announce what appear to be thought-out courses of action, set out by responsible people who "mean business". But in addition, the teacher-student relationship is carefully handled by means of two mitigating strategies: on the one hand, the participants are represented impersonally as third parties – rather than as addressers and addressees – and on the other, explicit deontic modality is scarcely used. This way, the risk of confrontation implicit in the laying out of rules is avoided: requirements are mentioned, but do not appear to be imposed on the addressee (Fairclough 1993: 157). This suggests that students' cooperative participation is expected – or taken for granted – through the performance of representative acts, rather than required through the performance of directive ones.

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