



Nominalization and grammatical metaphor: Elaborating the theory



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ABSTRACT

This article presents an elaborated framework for mapping learners' development of *nominalizations*, one prominent realization of the linguistic resource, *grammatical metaphor* (Halliday, 1993; Martin, 2008). The framework emerges from a larger, corpus-assisted analysis of the Chinese Longitudinal Learner Corpus (CLLC), 520 Chinese learner texts collected during the students' first four semesters of university (Liardét, 2013b, 2014, 2015). Over the past few decades, SFL research has provided rich descriptions of nominalizations (e.g., Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999; Taverniers, 2006); however, little has been done to empirically describe deployment quality and map learners' development ontogenetically, over time (Baratta, 2010). The proposed framework outlined in this paper seeks to identify how learners develop nominalization proficiency by accounting for intermediate realizations that may otherwise be dismissed as mistakes. These nuanced descriptions are illustrated throughout using excerpts from the CLLC and the paper concludes with pedagogical recommendations for apprenticing learners to advanced nominalization proficiency.

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1. Nominalization and academic writing

A key feature of academic discourse is the move toward static representations of language that reorganize dynamic, spoken interactions into lexically dense, noun-dominated language (Hunston, 2002; Hyland, 2008, 2009; Ravelli, 1996). The prevalent use of nouns, and specifically, nominalizations “to present densely packed information” is a key feature of academic prose (Biber, 1988, pp. 28–29; see also Biber, 2006; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Charles, 2003; Gebhard, Chen, & Britton, 2014; Guillen Galve, 1998; Hyland, 2004a, 2004b, 2008; Tognini-Bonelli, 2008). Although these descriptions are particularly salient within scientific discourses (Halliday, 1988; 2004), research has identified nominally-oriented language as a central feature across various disciplines (Coffin, 2006; Coffin et al., 2003; Martin, 1993; Martin & Veel, 1997; Schleppegrell, 2001; Schleppegrell & Achugar, 2003; Schleppegrell, Greer, & Taylor, 2008).

The construct of nominalization is elaborated within the theoretical framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which identifies nominalization as one pattern of a larger construct, *grammatical metaphor* (hereafter, GM; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999; Taverniers, 2006). SFL views language as a semiotic system mapped across planes of expression and content. Within the content plane, the layers of wordings (lexico-grammar) and meaning (semantic) exist in a stratified relationship of realization (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 26; Martin & Rose, 2008, 2003). When the functional realizations

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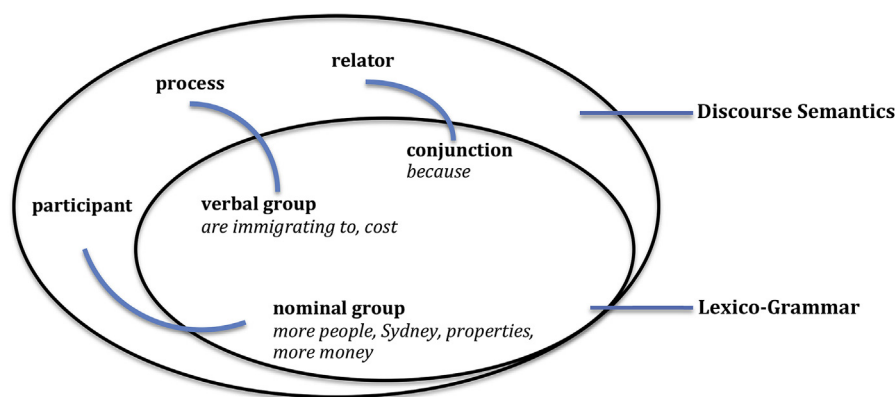


Figure 1. Congruent realization (Variation A).

of language at the level of the discourse semantics matches that of the lexico-grammar, the relationship can be described as *congruent* (Martin, 2008). Typically spoken or ‘unprepared’¹ language is realized in this congruent pattern. However, when language is written or more ‘prepared’, these relationships often become scrambled and the meanings of the discourse semantics are realized in an unnatural or ‘non-matching’ relationship described as *incongruent* or *metaphorical* (Halliday, 1993).

Different lexico-grammatical patterns of the same meanings can be mapped across these strata in either congruent or incongruent relationships. For example, the meanings of Sentence A can be realized by the following three patterns:

- A. Because more people are immigrating to Sydney, properties cost more money.
- B. Due to INCREASED IMMIGRATION² to Sydney, properties cost more money.
- C. Sydney’s IMMIGRATION GROWTH has led to increased property COSTS.

In Variation A, the two clauses (i.e., *more people are immigrating to Sydney*, and *properties cost more money*) are realized in a *congruent* (i.e., expected, natural) relationship, linked causally through the conjunction *because*. In other words, the participants³ (*more people, Sydney, properties, more money*) are realized congruently in the lexico-grammar as nominal groups, the processes (*are immigrating to, cost*) are realized congruently as verbal groups, and the relator (*because*) is realized congruently as a conjunction, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The second and third variations demonstrate alternative wordings and increasingly ‘static’, nominally-oriented realizations. In Variation B, the initial clause is reconstrued metaphorically as a circumstance: *due to INCREASED IMMIGRATION to Sydney*. In this reconstrual, the process, *immigrating*, is realized as a nominalization, *IMMIGRATION*, and the co-occurring participant (i.e., *more people*) is reorganized to modify this nominal group: *increased IMMIGRATION to Sydney*. Furthermore, the congruent relator, *because*, is deployed metaphorically as a prepositional phrase: *due to*. These metaphorical realizations are identified in Figure 2 through the broken lines.

Although the second variation demonstrates increased lexical density (i.e., the two clauses have been condensed into one), Variation A can be packaged further. In Variation C, the initial clause is reconstrued as a nominal group, *Sydney’s IMMIGRATION GROWTH*. The relator, *because*, is realized as a verbal group, *has led to*, and placed in relation to a reconstrual of the latter clause as the nominal group, *increased property COSTS*. Within these statically-oriented nominal groups, three nominalizations are deployed: *IMMIGRATION*, *GROWTH* and *COST*. The remapping of these meanings onto the lexico-grammar is illustrated in Figure 3.

Within SFL analysis, the reconstrual of the relator *because* in Variation A as a logical circumstance (i.e., prepositional group, *due to*) in Variation B and as a logical process (i.e., verbal group, *has led to*) in Variation C is referred to as *logical GM*. The deployment of logical metaphors is important for advanced achievement of academic writing as it allows for newly nominalized expressions to be placed within cause and effect networks, an important characteristic of formal, academic discourse (Halliday, 1989; Hyland, 2009, p. 7; Martin & Rose, 2003, p. 148). However, for reasons of scope, the current paper will focus

¹ The distinction of ‘prepared’ and ‘unprepared’ speech is used here following Biber’s (1988) descriptions of spontaneous speech acts (i.e., ‘unprepared’) and non-spontaneous speech (i.e., ‘prepared’). Although language is often mapped along a continuum of *spoken* to *written* discourse (e.g., Hyland, 2009), often language characteristic of written expression is delivered in the spoken mode (e.g., academic lectures, broadcasts, etc.; see also Biber & Conrad’s, 2001 distinction of ‘involved’ and ‘informational’ discourses). Thus, additional characterizations of ‘prepared’ speech allows for language expression delivered in alternative modes (i.e., written or spoken).

² For clarity, nominalizations are annotated using small capital letters.

³ Throughout this study, SFL transitivity descriptions are used to describe the experiential representations of language: processes (verbal groups), participants (nominal groups), and circumstances (adverbial groups and prepositional phrases) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Furthermore, participant or nominal group constituents are referred to as Thing (i.e., noun), Quality of Thing (i.e., adjective) and Quality of process (i.e., adverb). Note: clause elements are annotated using lower case letters; group constituents are capitalized.

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