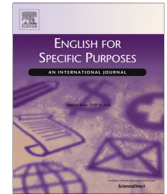




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Replying/responding to criticism in language studies



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ABSTRACT

It is widely recognized that academic discourse construes not only consensus, but also debate, which can sometimes be contentious. To gain a deeper insight into the rhetoric of disagreement in language studies, this article analyzes replies/responses, a genre whose primary communicative purpose is to challenge the counterclaims raised in previous publications. To rebut criticisms of their work or of the school/theory they associate themselves with, linguists use two strategies: first, they combine the arguments supporting their position with those discrediting criticism; and second, they provide only the arguments substantiating their views. Categorization of the arguments according to the rhetorical appeals they rely on reveals that the first strategy has two realizations – basic and expanded. The basic realization pairs the arguments strengthening an author's *logos* and *ethos* with the arguments weakening a critic's *logos*. It can be expanded to include *pathos* appeals to emphasize an author's adherence to and/or a critic's flouting of the community expectations, as well as the arguments weakening a critic's *ethos*. The second strategy employs all three means of persuasion to support an author's logic, trustworthiness, and alignment with the disciplinary norms. These findings are relevant to the study of disciplinary rhetoric and advanced student training.

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1. Introduction

It has increasingly been recognized that interaction in some academic genres cannot be accounted for solely by politeness theory which suggests that confrontation and direct criticism should be avoided to facilitate an objective and insightful discussion among the members of the academic community (e.g., Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Hunston, 2005; Hyland, 2004; Lewin, 2005; Richards, 2009; Tannen, 2002; Tracy & Baratz, 1993). The scholarly dialogue, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) and Hyland (2004) point out, is driven not only by cooperation, but also by “the ambitions, constraints [,] and rewards of academic engagement” (Hyland, 2004, p. 16). Hunston (2005), Lewin (2005), Richards (2009), Salager-Meyer (1998), Tannen (2002), Tracy and Baratz (1993), Vassileva (2009), and many others demonstrate that scholars not only construe consensus with their readers, but also argue with their colleagues both in their written work and oral discussions. As a result, academic discourse (especially such genres as peer-reviews, book reviews, comments, replies/responses, and panel exchanges) constitutes not only a site of consensus and a further development of previous research, but also a forum for debate, which at times can be contentious and face-threatening (Burgess & Fagan, 2002; Hunston, 1993, 2005; Lewin, 2005; Salager-Meyer, 1998; Tannen, 2002; Tracy & Baratz, 1993; Vassileva, 2009).

An examination of academic conflict across disciplines (e.g., Burgess & Fagan, 2002; Hunston, 1993; Hyland, 2004; Motta-Roth, 1998) demonstrates that negative evaluation figures prominently in language studies. As Hunston (2005), Martin

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(1992), Vassileva (2009), and Ventola (1998) show, exchanges between linguists contain research as well as researcher-directed criticisms. Hunston (2005) indicates that contentiousness is especially visible in one type of research article, which she labels “conflict articles”. The primary communicative purpose of these articles is “to counter the opinions expressed in previously-published articles” (Hunston, 2005, p. 2). Conflict articles stand out because they “engage in an argument that is more overt and personal than that found in typical research articles” and exhibit certain lexicogrammatical patterns more frequently than other academic articles (Hunston, 2005, p. 2). To gain a deeper insight into the discourse of disagreement in linguistics, the present article focuses on one genre of “conflict articles” – reply/response articles. In particular, it analyzes the rhetorical strategies linguists employ to rebut criticisms directed either at them and their work or at the theories/schools with which they associate themselves. This rhetorical analysis is intended to supplement earlier investigations of lexicogrammar (e.g., Diani’s (2007) scrutiny of nominal and verbal reporting expressions and Hunston’s (2005) treatment of attribution patterns) and social aspects of conflict in language studies (e.g., Martin, 1992; Ventola, 1998).

The present exploration begins with a brief overview of the recent literature on criticism in academic exchange (Section 2). The corpus and methodology used in the current study are outlined next (Sections 3 and 4). Section 5 offers a classification of the major arguments linguists use to legitimize their position and to dispute the views advocated by their critics. Section 6 discusses the ways these arguments are combined into rhetorical strategies. The article concludes with a summary of findings, pedagogical implications, and suggestions for further research (Section 7).

2. The place of criticism in academic discourse

Since negative evaluation is generally associated with higher intelligence and professional competence (Nass, 2010), it is not surprising that criticism is so pervasive in academic discourse (Tannen, 2002). In her analysis of recently published articles of literary criticism, Wilder (2005) finds what she calls the “mistaken critic topos,” that is, an indication of previous critics’ inability to see some aspect of the literary work correctly, in 86% of her sample.¹ The use of this topos, Wilder (2005, p. 102) suggests, facilitates “build[ing] new knowledge by constructing an inventory of consensual knowledge and then staking strategic claims against it”. At the same time, it also construes opposition by challenging the opinions of previous critics. Tannen (2002) and many other academics (e.g., Belcher, 1997; Frey, 1990; Lewin, 2005; Martin, 1992; Ventola, 1998) point out that attacks on colleagues and their work are damaging not only to individual scholars, but also to the entire academic community. They object to this conventionalized positioning of one’s work in opposition to prior scholarship because the agonistic debate prioritizes confrontation over “exploring complexity, culling insight from disparate sources, [and] seeking connections” (Tannen, 2002, p. 1667).

Whereas many authors of the reply/response articles examined in this study are also concerned about the agonistic culture of intellectual exchange, they appreciate the opportunity to participate in an open discussion motivating further research and knowledge integration, as indicated in (1):

(1) It is obvious . . . that the ultimate aim of a debate like the present one cannot be to entrench oneself in one’s own camp by repeating the same type of argument, but rather to investigate possible points of convergence and the possibility of reconciling the different points of view. (Lan8R, p. 542)²

However, to stimulate a fruitful scholarly dialogue, they insist a discussion should avoid the proliferation of contentiousness, or, in the words of the author of Lan10R, “criticisms should observe some ground rules of ‘fair play’” (p. 587).

What those ground rules are and how they are observed in the different disciplines has been investigated in such genres as book reviews (e.g., Diani, 2007; Hyland, 2004; Martin, 1992; Motta-Roth, 1998), conference discussions (e.g., Richards, 2009; Vassileva, 2009), department colloquia (e.g., Tracy & Baratz, 1993), comments (e.g., Lewin, 2005), research articles (e.g., Burgess & Fagan, 2002; Hunston, 1993), and conflict articles (e.g., Hunston, 2005). Most of these studies conclude that, on the one hand, scholars seek consensus with their colleagues; on the other, they mobilize this consensus to confront the ideas and individuals with whom they disagree. The ways of expressing disagreement, however, vary from “oppositional positioning . . . achieved not through direct argument but through a process of careful positioning that undermines alternative positions without actually addressing the arguments of their proponents directly” (Richards, 2009, p. 87) to “[t]he bashing . . . achieved by claiming that the school has produced no relevant and comprehensive work and that some work which has been marketed in its name really belongs to another field” (Ventola, 1998, p. 123). These two extremes (the first one representing a face-to-face interaction, the second one drawn from a written register) show that there is a wide spectrum of debate strategies which involve a varying degree of argumentative engagement. The present article focuses on the rhetorical strategies used in language studies to enhance our understanding of the discourse of conflict in this discipline and to offer advanced students of linguistics models to follow (e.g., “oppositional positioning”) and avoid (e.g., “bashing”).

¹ It is worth noting that both a significant, primary as well as a minor, passing, or secondary application of the topos was counted by Wilder (2005). It is also important that in Wilder’s (2005) sample, “a mistaken critic” is not necessarily a previous critic, but this role can be attributed to a hypothetical critic or an author himself/herself.

² For corpus contents and article bibliographic details, see Table 1.

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