Journal of English for Academic Purposes 22 (2016) 109–118

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

Grammatical metaphor: Distinguishing success

Cassi L. Liardét

Macquarie University, Department of Linguistics, Room 518, Building C5A, New South Wales, 2109, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 22 September 2014
Received in revised form 10 December 2015
Accepted 29 January 2016
Available online 18 February 2016

Keywords:
Academic communication
Grammatical metaphor
Nominalisation
Academic literacy

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a systematic analysis of ten first-year university learners' texts. The texts are exposition essays written at the conclusion of the students' first semester of university study and collected as part of the Macquarie University Longitudinal Learner Corpus (MQLLC). The MQLLC is a longitudinal corpus that follows learners from their first year Academic Communication (AC) unit throughout their tertiary careers. These units are taught using a scaffolded, genre-based pedagogy, with explicit instruction of the linguistic resources necessary to navigate the diverse and increasingly specialised demands of tertiary study (Rothery & Stenglin, 1995). As part of a larger study into academic literacy development, this small-scale study focuses on learner deployment of *grammatical metaphor*, a key linguistic resource for achieving the lexical density, text cohesion and condensation valued in academic discourse (Halliday, 1993, 1998; Hyland, 2009; Martin, 1993, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2001; 2004). Specifically, this paper seeks to identify how high performing learners' deployment of grammatical metaphor differs from that of low performing students to elucidate which patterns distinguish success. The paper concludes with pedagogical recommendations for ensuring learners effectively deploy this valuable resource.

1. Introduction

The study of academic discourse, or the language of the academy, is central to the development of academic literacy as it models the diverse linguistic patterns valued in educational contexts, particularly that of tertiary institutions. A primary distinction of academic discourse is the shift in the register and mode from that of everyday, informal, interactions toward more specialised, formal, written exchanges (Candlin & Hyland, 1999; Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014; Rothery & Stenglin, 1995; Schleppegrell, 2001). In general, academic, written language is characterised as more lexically dense and authoritative, foregrounding events existing in cause and effect networks (Hyland, 2009, p. 7). Such language is a shift away from informal, everyday spoken language characterised by dynamic actions realised by mostly human actors, or participants, through processes.[1] Academic discourse requires these dynamic processes to be reconstrued as static, synoptic entities systematically organised to enable comparison, contrast and evaluation (Martin, 1993; Schleppegrell, 2004).

E-mail address: Cassi.Liardet@mq.edu.au.

[1] SFL transitivity descriptions of processes (realised through verbal groups), participants (realised through nominal groups), and circumstances (realised by adverbial groups and prepositional phrases) are used throughout this study to describe the experiential representations of language (see Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Butt et al., 2000). Furthermore, SFL nominal group constituents are referred to as Thing (i.e. Head noun), and Quality (i.e. 'Quality of Thing', adjective).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2016.01.009
1475-1585/

As learners navigate the spectrum of genres and registers required in higher education, they are expected to develop and appropriately select the linguistic resources necessary to participate successfully in these discourse communities. Over the past three decades, SFL research has been particularly interested in the study of these advanced linguistic patterns, revealing significant insights into learners' ontogenetic development. Schleppegrell's (2001) seminal study on the language of schooling succinctly encapsulates commonalities found across a broad range of SFL research into school-based registers:

> Using lexicalized and expanded noun phrases, marking discourse structure with linguistic elements that are typical of written academic discourse, and choosing grammatical features that project an authoritative stance are features that are pervasive in school-based registers. (p. 434)

Across the research, one linguistic resource is consistently identified as a critical tool for achieving these academic features, that of *grammatical metaphor* (GM hereafter).

Halliday (1993) identifies the emergence of GM as representative of the move from concrete, congruent interactions to abstract, incongruent or 'metaphorical' ones.[2] For example, the congruent process, *to be able to*, can be reconstrued as a metaphorical Thing, *ability*. *Ability* can now be characterised (e.g., *improved ability*, *extraordinary abilities*, etc.) or even classified according to specialised fields (e.g., *athletic abilities*, *technological ability*, etc.), expanding the possible messages that can be expressed. This development is characterised by a tension between the strata of the lexico-grammar and the discourse semantics. This stratal tension enables writers to mean more than one thing at once, essentially extending the meaning potential of the language (Martin, 2008, p. 803). The former mode of congruent, concrete language is characteristic of spoken discourses in which 'happenings' are transitory and highly dependent on the interaction with the interlocutor and the context. The latter mode of incongruent abstraction construes these 'happenings' as fixed, synoptic entities, adapted for recording in the written mode (Halliday, 1979, 1998). This shift toward stable, fixed phenomena allows information to be organised systematically, categorised, commented on and evaluated, promoting the flow of information through a creation of "a new kind of knowledge: scientific knowledge; and a new way of learning" (Halliday, 1993, p. 131).

2. The study

Systemic Functional Linguistics research has identified GM as a central feature of academic registers and mapped its emergence in first language users of English (e.g., Christie, 2002; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Derewianka, 1995; 2003; Painter, 1999; 2003; Ravelli, 2003) second and foreign language learners of English (e.g., Chen & Foley, 2004; Liardét, 2013a; 2015; Schleppegrell, 2004; Wang, 2010), and learners of other languages (e.g., Byrnes, 2009; Colombi, 2002; 2006; Ryshina-Pankova, 2010). However, many of these studies focus on instances of GM as contributory to academic success rather than exploring the quality and impact of the GM on the construction of academic expression. Liardét's (2013b) study, however, elaborates the theoretical framework for analysing GM deployment to account for the impact or effect that the GM has on the construction of academically valued texts: *textual impact* (also referred to as *logogenetic impact*).

The present study employs Liardét's (2013b, 2014) elaborated theoretical framework for mapping GM proficiency in learner texts to analyse ten first-year university student texts at an Australian university. The learners are participants in the Macquarie Longitudinal Learner Corpus (MQLLC), a longitudinal corpus of university student assignments collected across participants' university careers. The MQLLC recruits students during their first year of university study through their enrolment in one of the university's "Academic Communication" (AC) units. The AC units at Macquarie University are uniquely classified as "People" units, available to students across the faculties and qualifying as an elective 'core unit'. People units are intended to broaden students' understanding of global challenges and issues, developing learners' *socio-cultural literacy* through a focus on social inclusion (Macquarie University Handbook, 2015). The ten students selected for this analysis were enrolled in Academic Communication for Business and Economics (ACBE), a unit focused on developing both academic and professional business discourse.

The AC units at Macquarie University employ a genre-based pedagogy with explicit instruction of GM and its impact on the semiotic reorganisation of academic texts. Throughout the semester, students collaborate with classmates to research a social inclusion issue (e.g., refugee resettlement, financial services for the poor, income gender inequality, etc.) and scaffold their literacy skills through reports, explanations and persuasive texts. The texts analysed in this study are the final argument essay required in the AC unit. The ten learners analysed here represent both English as a First Language (L1) and English as an Additional Language (EAL) students. These ten texts can be further classified according to the level of success on this final assignment; five texts were successful, achieving High Distinction and Distinction marks (i.e., 75% and above), while the other five texts were less successful, achieving Pass and Fail marks (i.e., 64% and below). For purposes of comparison, three of the students in each designation are English L1 learners and two are EAL learners; Table 1 below outlines the learners by language background and category of success.

In addition to evaluating the content of the argument essays, the marking criteria assess several academic writing skills (i.e., clause-level grammar, genre staging patterns and referencing) as well as academic expression (e.g., lexical density, objective evaluation, cohesion). Notably, the papers are marked by AC unit tutors (i.e., not the researcher) and the high and

[2] Notably, learners do not always follow the congruent to incongruent continuum; however, this pathway of development is an important framework for analysing learners' progression into the more abstract, technical language of academic discourse.