



A meaning-based approach to the study of complexity in L2 writing: The case of grammatical metaphor



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ABSTRACT

This article argues for an alternative approach to complexity in L2 writing that foregrounds the link between aspects of linguistic complexity and its discourse-semantic function of constructing particular types of meanings in written texts. To illustrate a meaning- and form-integrating approach, the paper focuses on nominalizations as a linguistic form recently identified as a potentially significant indicator of complexity of advanced L2 writing. In line with the linguistic theory of meaning making, systemic functional linguistics (SFL), nominalizations are explored as realizations of grammatical metaphor (GM), a concept that helps capture the complexity of the semantic dimension of these linguistic forms. Furthermore, exploring nominalizations as GMs helps explain their discourse function as meeting the demands of more complex communicative tasks typical of advanced literacy contexts. Application of such conceptualization of complexity is illustrated by an analysis of an advanced L2 writing task that demonstrates precisely how nominalizations as GMs enable the L2 writer to meet the complexity of these demands through conceptual refiguration of experience and configuration or development of concepts in texts. The paper concludes with the implications of such an approach for L2 writing research, curriculum construction, and L2 writing pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

The construct of complexity in learner production has attracted increasingly keen interest from SLA researchers in general, as well as writing researchers in particular (e.g., Crossley & McNamara, 2014; Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Ortega, 2003). Despite this interest there has also been dissatisfaction with the current measurement approaches that typically assess L2 writing through quantitative measures of lexical complexity, such as lexical density, and syntactic complexity, such as amount of subordination. Pallotti (2009) and Ortega (2012) lament that complexity measures are often used and interpreted in simplistic terms reduced to “the longer the better” and “the more the better” arguments. Norris and Ortega (2009) propose that different complexity measures should be considered as more or less appropriate for investigating different acquisitional levels and that one should use a combination of them to gain a more accurate insight into the phenomenon.

The findings have also been inconsistent. For example, in reviewing studies of complexity in L2 writing Norris and Ortega (2009) and Ortega (2012) report that increases in subordination and the length of *T*-units, despite being the two most popular measures of linguistic complexity, are indicative of only some levels in language development and in fact do not capture the entire developmental span. Similarly, Bulté and Housen (2014) conclude from the results of the analysis of post-secondary L2 written texts in the Michigan State University (MSU) corpus that subordination “may not be adequate to gauge

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L2 complexity in all contexts under all circumstances” (p. 56) and may even be an inadequate measure of advanced learner writing. And Pallotti (2009) cautions, assumptions that increase in subordination (or other complexity measures) signals development are problematic, since complexity may reflect contextual factors and can be thus strongly related to situational appropriateness and to the nature of genre and task.

The problem Pallotti (2009) indirectly points at is that complexity is studied as an ability to produce certain types of language forms, divorced of considerations of meaningful content production and realization of communicative goals. For example, why would one expect a large amount of subordination in a text type such as descriptions in the first place? The communicative purpose of descriptions, whether administered as a lower-level or a higher-level proficiency task, is primarily about the characterization of a person, object, or phenomenon, which is typically realized through the use of noun phrases and their modification (e.g., *special person, my childhood friend*), rather than about temporal or causative relations which are typically realized through subordinate clauses. This might explain why in descriptions L2 writers would prefer noun elaboration as opposed to subordination in response to contextually-determined demands, while subordination might still be a relevant indicator of progress when its use is analyzed in other genres. Indices of subordination or phrasal elaboration not only signal performance at a certain level or progression towards greater complexity but are also more or less likely to occur in specific genres or text types.

While the studies in this special issue successfully address some of the identified shortcomings in investigation of complexity in L2 writing by using a combination of complexity measures (Lu & Ai, this volume; Vyatkina, Hirschmann, & Golcher, this volume) and by relating complexity features to specific tasks (Adams, Newton, & Nik, this volume) and genres (Mazgutova & Kormos, this volume), this article contributes to the research on L2 writing by offering an understanding of linguistic complexity that focuses on the meaning dimension of complexity. This dimension has been missing from traditional investigations of complexity and from the existing taxonomies of the construct. The current contribution thus attempts to show empirically what is to be gained when a linguistic theory of meaning making, Systemic Functional Linguistics, or SFL (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), is put to the task to characterize linguistic complexity as a reflection of both development and communicative appropriateness. The proposal takes to its ultimate consequences the idea that language use and development are motivated by the meaning-based, contextual, and communicative demands of the tasks to which learners actively respond. What would be achieved with this change of perspective, and what would a meaning-based approach to the measurement of complexity in L2 writing accomplish? I will argue that contextual aspects at the heart of the meaning-making purposes associated with different genres might explain the variation found in syntactic and lexical complexity in L2 production. Moreover, and in turn, curricular and pedagogic practices informed by a meaning-based understanding of L2 complexity may have an impact on L2 learner written performance and writing development and by implication on our approach to the analysis of complexity in L2 writing.

The article is organized as follows. I begin with a focus on nominalizations as a linguistic form recently identified as a potentially significant indicator of complexity of advanced L2 writing. I then propose to view this feature of complexity in meaning-oriented terms as a methodological move that can help clarify why it should be measured in the first place. To this end, and in line with the SFL theory (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Ravelli, 2003), I suggest using the concept of grammatical metaphor (GM), typically realized as nominalizations, as a construct that links linguistic complexity to discourse-semantic complexity and helps capture complex meaning making in advanced L2 writer texts. The analysis of L2 writer textual excerpts that follows illustrates precisely how GMs as nominalizations function as a tool for making complex meanings in advanced literacy contexts. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of such an approach to complexity for L2 writing research, for curriculum construction, and for pedagogy at different levels of language acquisition.

2. Complexity as complex meaning making through particular linguistic resources

Housen, Kuiken, and Vedder, (2012) define linguistic complexity in L2 writing as “formal or semantic-functional properties of L2 elements” (p. 4). However, so far the majority of research studies on linguistic complexity have favored the formal properties of complexity and operationalized this construct as grammatical and lexical complexity (Bulté & Housen, 2012). What appears to be missing from research is a focus on the discourse-semantic aspects of linguistic complexity defined as a focus on the link between the complexity of linguistic forms and its function in construction of meaning (semantics) in texts (discourse) at different levels of L2 abilities, an area of investigation that should be of particular interest to L2 writing research and instruction. The formal and structural features of linguistic complexity on the one hand and the discourse-semantic complexity on the other appear to be separated in the current elaborate taxonomy of complexity constructs offered by Bulté and Housen (2012, p. 23). For example, while the discourse-interactive complexity (as the number and type of turns in a dialogue) and propositional complexity (as the number of idea units) are part of the model, it is not clear whether and how these constructs are related to the complexity of forms.

I propose that research on complexity in L2 writing can gain both theoretical and pedagogical insights by focusing on the link between aspects of linguistic complexity and its discourse-semantic function of constructing particular types of meanings in written texts. To illustrate such an approach to complexity, I explore the discourse-semantic properties of nominalizations as linguistic forms that, in contrast to the common syntactic complexity measures of beginning and intermediate L2 writer texts, have been suggested as signaling complexity in advanced written discourse associated with a shift from a dynamic verb-based to a more complex noun-based style (Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010; Ortega, 2012). Indeed, a nominalized style has for quite some time been identified as one of the most salient features of advanced literacy discourses:

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