



Evaluative stance in high achieving Year 3 persuasive texts



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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explicate the broad range of evaluative language choices made by Tasmanian Year 3 students who scored highly on the 2011 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy writing test. Each text is analysed using the three systems of Appraisal (Martin & White, 2005) from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1994), highlighting how these young writers attempted to persuade their readers. Building on prior studies into young students' use of evaluative language in their writing, this paper aims to provide a starting point for Year 3 educators who wish teach language choices that are highly valued in the context of formal examinations. This paper highlights that even at the young age of eight years old, students must demonstrate a wide range of complex language skills to write effective persuasive texts.

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Introduction

"Persuasive writing is a demanding task that requires the use of complex language to analyse, discuss, and resolve controversies in a way that is clear, convincing, and considerate of diverse points of view" (Nippold, Wald-Lonergan, & Fanning, 2005, p. 125). In recent years, the development of persuasive writing skills has been a key aspect of curricular reforms in primary and high schools throughout the world, and a major challenge to teachers in K-12 classrooms (Newell, Beach, Smith, & VanDerHeide, 2011). In Australia, persuasive writing represents a key component of the new *Australian Curriculum: English* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2011), and has attracted further attention by being the focus of the *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* [NAPLAN] writing test between 2011 and 2014. In order to assess students' proficiency in persuasive writing and other literacy and numeracy tasks, the *Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs* [hereafter MCEETYA] instigated the NAPLAN tests in 2008, to determine whether students were being adequately prepared for life after school by the Australian school systems. As part of this process, every Australian Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 student has been required to write a persuasive text about different topics each year since 2011. Their texts are marked and ranked for their use of persuasive writing strategies, in accordance with a set of criteria drawn from the *Statements of Learning for English* document (MCEECDYA, 2005). Students' rankings are combined to highlight how particular classrooms and schools perform in relation to national averages. Despite any assistance offered by NAPLAN reports, however, research suggests many teachers struggle with the complexities of teaching persuasive reading and writing (Hillocks, 2010; Kuhn, 2005; Newell et al., 2011; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

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Traditionally, research into the development of persuasive writing skills has stemmed largely from either the cognitive or the social practices perspective. Researchers from the social side suggest persuasive reading and writing are a set of social practices that change across and within different contexts (Beach, 1999; Iran-Nejad & Pearson, 1999). Newell et al. (2011) stated that this social practices perspective is concerned with “the study of literacy events and practices shaped by specific social, cultural, or political perspectives” (p. 278). In their review of research around the teaching and learning of persuasive reading and writing, Newell et al. (2011) stated that the “analysis of persuasive texts as social practices draws on several different theoretical perspectives: *new rhetoric*, *social genre*, *dialogic/discourse analysis*, and *visual rhetoric*” (p. 289). However, they did not account for the system networks of *Appraisal* (Martin & White, 2005), which represent worthwhile tools in understanding how language is used to persuade others from the social practices perspective.

Working within the field of *systemic functional linguistics* (hereafter *SFL*), a number of studies (Coffin, 2002; Cominos, 2009; Hyland, 2007; Lancaster, 2011) have been conducted in educational contexts to show how successful persuasive writing involves the use of particular linguistic resources from *Appraisal* (Martin & White, 2005), which features three complementary meaning-making dimensions: *ATTITUDE*,¹ *ENGAGEMENT* and *GRADUATION* (Martin & White, 2005). For instance, Swain’s (2010) *ATTITUDE* and *ENGAGEMENT* analysis of non-native English speaking undergraduates’ persuasive texts found that “students of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) may experience less difficulty with effective deployment of the resources of *ATTITUDE* than those of dialogic positioning” (p. 291). The vast majority of studies employing the *Appraisal* systems have investigated writing in such tertiary contexts, while studies investigating *Appraisal* choices made by primary school students are far less common for any genre of writing, and seemingly non-existent for persuasive writing. Notable exceptions to this are the works of Christie and Derewianka (2008) and Christie (2012), which both involved large scale analyses of primary school *Appraisal* choices across a number of key writing genres. While the findings of these works uncovered much about primary school writers’ use of evaluative language for numerous literary purposes, their attempts to persuade others were not considered. To address this gap in the literature, and to support primary school educators who wish to teach persuasive writing from the functional perspective, this paper reports a research study investigating the evaluative language choices made by young writers who scored most highly on the 2011 NAPLAN writing test. These students made language choices that were highly valued by the markers for meeting the NAPLAN criteria, drawn from the Statements of Learning for English (MCEECDYA, 2005), and as such represent the sorts of choices that teachers can focus on to develop students’ persuasive writing skills.

Background: persuasive writing from the functional perspective

Systemic functional linguistics

Stemming from the seminal work of Halliday (1976, 1977), *SFL* focuses on relationships between texts and contexts, and allows researchers to explore how language choices act upon and are constrained by the social context in which they occur. When considering the development of language skills, the *SFL* perspective is concerned with the increasing range of contexts that children participate in as they grow, the linguistic demands they face within these contexts, and the linguistic resources they require to develop to operate successfully in these contexts (Christie & Derewianka, 2008). The language choices made by text producers differ according to three contextual variables, the field of the text (i.e., the topic being written or spoken about), the tenor (i.e., the status of the audience in relation to the writer or speaker), and the mode (i.e., the nature of the text as written, spoken, monomodal or multimodal) (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). In this way, the language choices that are valued in one context will differ from those valued in another.

At its core, *SFL* is designed to provide sets of complementary lenses for interpreting language in use, with the broadest of these being the notion of three simultaneously functioning kinds of meaning: the three *metafunctions* (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). The first of these, the *ideational* metafunction, involves resources that describe experiences – what is happening, who is doing what, where and when is it happening, and other situational circumstances. By contrast, the *interpersonal* metafunction involves resources that negotiate social relations – how people interact and communicate feelings. Finally, the *textual* metafunction involves resources that control the flow of information – how the ideational and interpersonal meanings are distributed across texts in ways that make them coherent and cohesive (Martin & White, 2005).

While all three metafunctions provide useful tools for understanding any genre of writing, the interpersonal metafunction is particularly useful when working with persuasive texts, as it features the *Appraisal* systems (Martin & White, 2005). These systems are concerned with the use of evaluative language to communicate feelings, to judge behaviours, and to assess non-human phenomena positively and/or negatively. According to Martin and White (2005), *Appraisal* can be used to show how speakers and writers “approve or disprove, enthuse and abhor, applaud and criticise, and [how they] position their listeners/readers to do likewise” (p. 1). It is represented as three interrelated systems: *ATTITUDE*, *GRADUATION* and *ENGAGEMENT* (See Fig. 1).

As depicted in Fig. 1, the *ATTITUDE* system is itself made up by three semantic regions. These are concerned with: positive or negative feelings communicated with resources of *AFFECT*; attitudes towards people and behaviours communicated with resources of *JUDGEMENT*; and evaluations of semiotic or natural things communicated with resources of *APPRECIATION* (Martin

¹ Within the field of *SFL*, a number of concepts are typed in small capital letters to avoid confusion with the typical meanings of the words.

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