



Understanding the language of evaluation in examiners' reports on doctoral theses

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ABSTRACT

Despite their high stakes nature, examiners' reports on doctoral theses are a relatively unexplored genre. Very little work has been done, further, on how evaluative language constructs meanings in the reports. To better understand the evaluative language used in the reports, this study analyses the examination criteria established by a university in New Zealand and draws on the APPRAISAL framework to examine 142 examiners' reports from that institution. We explore the examiners' reports through the generalised systems of ATTITUDE and ENGAGEMENT and extend the framework by suggesting more delicate options within APPRECIATION and JUDGEMENT and introduce two new concepts, covert judgement and embedded judgement. While it is primarily the thesis that is *appreciated* in the reports, in line with the university's examination criteria, it is often the case that the candidate is also *judged* and the examiner is *affected*.

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Introduction

Writing a PhD requires an extended period of dedication and commitment. While it may be a rewarding experience, it is nonetheless stressful, culminating in reports written by two or more examiners. For the student, receiving and reading a PhD examiner's report can be a daunting experience; the examiner can often be perceived – as in Carter's (2008, p. 365) depiction – as “faceless, feared and potentially testy”. This process may be further exacerbated by the often ambiguous use of language in the reports. While thesis writing guidebooks advise candidates to treat criticism in an examiner's report as something to make them stronger and the thesis better, and to respond to the required emendations in a fair and considered way (e.g. Mathews, 2004), and while some research has identified the presence of evaluative elements in examiners' reports (Holbrook et al., 2004), very little work has been done on the evaluative language used by examiners in their reports and on whether examiners formulate their recommendations in ways that can be clearly understood by the students to whom they are addressed.

Several studies have reported on the content of examiners' reports and the extent to which comments can be construed as instances of summative or formative evaluation (e.g. Holbrook et al., 2012). Mullins and Kiley (2002) study of examiners'

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experience of examining doctoral theses in Australia noted, for example, that whereas examiners viewed their task as largely formative in nature, the students experienced the examiners' feedback as summative, suggesting divergent understandings of the evaluative language used in the reporting. Our study is the first to adopt a well-known linguistic framework, systemic-functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2007; Martin & White, 2005), to provide a framework for analysing the language of evaluation used by examiners of this high-stakes assessment genre.

In this article, we demonstrate the potential ambiguities and complexities of the evaluative language of examiners' reports and foreground the distinction between evaluative comments which might be considered "official" and those which may be construed as peripheral, or "unofficial" (elaborated on below). We suggest that candidates firstly need to recognise constructive criticism and evaluation and whether the evaluation is directed at the thesis or the candidate. In addition, we point out that candidates have to negotiate a range of evaluative feedback, differentiating between mandatory requests and optional suggestions.

In order to achieve its aim, this article analyses the examination criteria established by the institution in question and the evaluative language of examiners' reports on PhD theses submitted at that institution through a systemic functional linguistic lens. In particular, it draws on the framework of APPRAISAL (Martin & White, 2005) in order to demonstrate that, while it is primarily the thesis that is *appreciated* in the reports, as in accordance with the criteria, it is often the case that the candidate is *judged* and the examiner is *affected*.

The article begins by briefly reviewing some of the literature concerned with evaluative language in examiners' reports in terms of feedback, and then it outlines the theoretical framework on which we draw. After describing our methodology, we apply the APPRAISAL framework to the data; in so doing, we extend the framework by suggesting another option within APPRECIATION, more delicate options within JUDGEMENT and by introducing two new concepts, *covert judgement* and *embedded judgement*. We discuss the findings in relation to existing literature and address some problems which our research raises, before making some concluding remarks.

Literature review

Mullins and Kiley (2002, p. 370) pointed out that "there has been surprisingly little research on the way in which examiners make judgements about the quality and quantity of the research work and the way it is reported". Some more recent research has examined the language of examiners' reports in terms of evaluation, feedback and assessment, arguably the principal purposes of the report. For, Holbrook et al. (2012, p. 4) the evaluation of a PhD thesis entails the examiner judging "both the potential of the researcher and the quality of the research". Holbrook et al. (2004, p. 111) point out that examiners listed "honesty, integrity, perseverance, patience, creativity, maturity, care and attention to detail and a commitment to undertake challenging projects" as a list of positive attributes; in contrast, "inadequate, unfocused or disjointed literature reviews; inappropriate experimental designs or methodologies; analytical or statistical deficiencies and unsubstantiated or overstated claims" were perceived as negative. What is interesting about this description is that the positive evaluation could be considered attributes of the candidate, whereas the negative evaluation refers mainly to the thesis.

Comprehensible feedback is essential in order to close the gap between desired and current performance (cf. Kumar & Stracke, 2011). Kumar and Stracke (2007) and Stracke and Kumar (2010) investigated the function of feedback from thesis supervisors; they categorised feedback into three main categories: referential (editorial, organisation content) directive (suggestion, question, instruction) and expressive (praise, criticism, opinion). If candidates are required to acknowledge the examiners' comments and revise their work, they need to understand first what is required and what is suggested, and this is facilitated by firstly understanding the thing or person being evaluated; that is, what is being appreciated and who is being judged or affected.

While previous research has demonstrated that potential misinterpretations can be caused by hedging, or 'sugar-coating the pill', when praising and criticising students' work in written feedback (Hyland & Hyland, 2001), we also point out that misunderstandings might be due to the inability to recognise what is being evaluated and whether the evaluation pertains to or could be considered extraneous to the criteria. That is, the candidate must make a distinction between evaluative comments which are summative and those which are formative, and, if they are formative, determine the extent to which they function as constructive criticism, recommendations or requests (Fortanet, 2008). In addition, some comments are prescriptive whereas others allow room for negotiation; thus candidates must distinguish between evaluative comments which require consideration and/or subsequent action and those which require no further action, and this relies on recognising the evaluation in relation to the criteria and what or who is being evaluated – the thesis, the candidate or the examiners themselves (discussed further below). The potential inability to differentiate between the focus of evaluation, we suggest, is potentially frustrating for the audience of the reports (candidates, supervisors and heads of school), particularly when candidates need to negotiate evaluative comments, some of which are "official", required according to the criteria, and some are "unofficial" and personal.

While some previous research (Hyland & Hyland, 2001) has focussed on the illocutionary force (cf. Austin's (1962) speech act theory) of the evaluation, some have created a tripartite taxonomy of evaluations (Stracke & Kumar, 2010) and others have differentiated between negative and positive evaluations (Holbrook et al., 2004), a gap still exists as these approaches do not systematically indicate what or who is being evaluated, how things are evaluated, and whether these evaluations are appropriate according to the criteria.

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