



# Student perceptions of stylistic variation in introductory university textbooks



Jesse Egbert\*

Northern Arizona University, English Department, Box 6032, Flagstaff, AZ 86011, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

Available online 25 October 2013

### Keywords:

Academic writing  
Introductory university textbooks  
Multi-Dimensional analysis  
Corpus stylistics  
Reader perceptions

## ABSTRACT

Previous research on university textbooks has focused on their use of objective linguistic features, without any reference to the perceptions of student readers. This study uses a new dual methodology to measure student perceptions of linguistic variation in textbook passages. Undergraduate university students ( $N = 80$ ) read textbook passages from two disciplines (psychology and geology) and rated them using a new instrument, the Perceptions of Effectiveness, Comprehensibility, and Organization (PECO) Scale. After objectively quantifying 74 key linguistic features of university textbooks, Biber's Multi-Dimensional analysis was used to identify and interpret underlying 'dimensions' of linguistic variation in introductory textbook prose. This resulted in five interpretable dimensions of variability in textbook language. Finally, statistical correlations between the perceptual and linguistic variables suggest that academic involvement and elaboration, colloquial discourse, academic clarity, and contextualized narration are related to student perceptions of textbook effectiveness, comprehensibility, and organization.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. University textbooks

It is likely that introductory university textbooks have a larger and more diverse target audience than any other written academic register. Surprisingly, research on the language of this register is underrepresented in the literature. The few studies that have investigated the characteristics of textbook language have focused on describing objective linguistic features, without reference to the impact those features have on the target audience. While some of these studies have focused on the use of individual linguistic features in textbooks, such as sentence length and punctuation (Whissell, 1997) and the use of lexical bundles (Biber, Conrad, & Cortes, 2004), the most important recent findings about the unique nature of university textbooks have been revealed through the use of Multi-Dimensional (MD) analysis. MD analysis is a method developed by Biber (1988) in which a large number of linguistic features are reduced to a much smaller set of functionally interpretable dimensions in order to describe linguistic patterns within and across language varieties (see Conrad & Biber, 2001). MD analyses of academic language have revealed a great deal of variability among university registers (Biber, 2006), between journal articles and textbooks (Conrad, 1996), as well as across disciplines in journal articles (Gray, 2011) and textbooks (Carlin, 2001).

In one of the few in-depth studies of university language, Biber (2006) used MD analysis to show that university textbook prose has the characteristics of literate discourse (rather than oral discourse); it is content-focused (rather than procedural);

\* Tel.: +1 928 523 0574.

E-mail addresses: [Jesse.Egbert@nau.edu](mailto:Jesse.Egbert@nau.edu), [jesse.egbert@yahoo.com](mailto:jesse.egbert@yahoo.com)

it tends to be concrete and current (rather than a reconstructed account of events); and it is more teacher-centered than other written university language. These results support and further clarify earlier findings from [Carkin's \(2001\)](#) MD analysis of introductory textbooks and classroom lectures. She reported that, compared to lectures, textbooks are inherently informational, non-narrative, elaborated, non-argumentative, and abstract. Both of these studies address variation in textbook language across disciplines and text types. However, [Biber \(2006\)](#) calls for additional studies that investigate “particular university registers at a much more specified level” (p. 227).

It can be hypothesized that the experiences of student readers will vary depending on the stylistic choices made by textbook authors, such as the degree to which a textbook contains linguistic features associated with ‘non-narrative’ or ‘abstract’ writing. However, these are empirical questions that require the measurement of student responses to linguistic variation in textbook writing. Although there is a long tradition of research that measures subjective variables such as perceptions of text quality and comprehensibility, there are virtually no studies that focus on textbook language or endeavor to correlate reader perceptions with linguistic variability.

## 1.2. Stylistic perception

In contrast with studies that describe author style by quantifying objective linguistic features, some researchers have approached writing style by measuring subjective reader perceptions of a text. For decades there have been debates regarding the utility of two traditionally opposing frameworks for stylistic analysis: subjective and objective. [Riffaterre \(1967\)](#) argues that style can only be studied through subjective perceptions of an author’s writing. He asserts that quantifications of linguistic norms are both “unobtainable” and “irrelevant,” and that the concept of style is only realized subjectively by an individual decoder within a given context (p. 425). [Milic \(1967\)](#) echoes these ideas by criticizing any attempt to create stylistic taxonomies, claiming the non-existence of stylistic categories. On the other hand, some scholars have focused their research on ‘group styles’, which can be identified through the investigation of linguistic variation across texts ([DiMarco & Hirst, 1993](#); [Hendricks, 1976](#)). A large body of recent linguistic research has shown conclusively that linguistic norms are both obtainable and relevant. However, [Riffaterre's \(1967\)](#) claims are intriguing because of his intense focus on the perceptions of the reader, who, he reminds, is “the consciously selected target of the author” (p. 419). Like Riffaterre, [Crystal \(1972\)](#) has also emphasized the importance of developing reliable measures of stylistic perception in order to “establish the generalizability of our stylistic intuitions” and aid in the interpretation of stylistic variability in language use (p. 110). More than forty years after Crystal’s call, measures of this nature still do not exist.

Only a small handful of previous studies have attempted to fill this gap. The most notable is [Carroll's \(1960\)](#) innovative use of factor analysis to measure prose style using variables of two types, objectively quantified linguistic variables and subjective perceptions from a handful of ‘expert judges’. The results of Carroll’s factor analysis revealed clear underlying dimensions of variation in prose style. An equally important finding was his discovery that subjective variables correlated with one another more strongly than they did with objective linguistic variables. Carroll’s study highlights the value of measuring both objective linguistic and subjective perceptual measures of writing style.

Most studies of the language in university textbooks have been based on descriptive linguistic research. Previous research has suggested the potential usefulness of complementary research that focuses on the perceptions of target audience readers. However, no studies have investigated the relationships between the writing styles of university textbooks and the perceptions of student readers. Furthermore, there are currently no standardized instruments that have been developed for this purpose. The goal of this study is to address this gap by proposing a methodological framework for measuring student perceptions of stylistic variation in introductory university textbooks. In order to achieve this goal, the data gathered in this study will be used to answer the following three research questions.

## 1.3. Research questions

1. What are the underlying dimensions of linguistic variation in introductory university textbooks?
2. Can student perceptions of introductory textbook prose be reliably assessed?
3. Are there statistically significant relationships between linguistic variation in and student perceptions of introductory university textbook language?

## 2. Methods and results

The methods used in this study can be divided into three major phases. [Table 1](#) contains a broad overview of the steps that will be accomplished during each phase.

### 2.1. Phase 1: Multi-Dimensional analysis

In Phase 1 linguistic variation in introductory university textbooks will be objectively quantified and described using a corpus of introductory textbooks. This section will describe the corpus that will be used in the study, as well as the various steps in the MD analysis, including the selection, identification, and quantification of the linguistic variables, as well as the methodological decisions made during the factor analysis and interpretation of the dimensions. During the course of this

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/366156>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/366156>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)