



The language of praise and criticism in a student evaluation survey



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ABSTRACT

The use of student surveys in higher education to evaluate teaching has escalated in the past decade, in many cases deployed at national level. With the focus on quantitative ratings, systematic and theory-grounded analysis of students' written feedback comments has been largely neglected in research. This study applies a linguistic model for analysing evaluative discourse to a sample of student feedback comments. Findings quantify the extent to which students manage language through intensification or moderation of views, highlighting significant asymmetry in how praise and criticisms are presented. Praise is often direct and targeted at lecturers, whereas criticisms frequently objectify teaching as an act. Interpretations consider functional aspects of language used in feedback, and applications of the framework for comparative studies.

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Introduction

Feedback from students has long been used to inform and measure teaching quality, evaluate courses and provide more general insight into the learning experience. Whilst student evaluations of teaching have a long history, it is primarily since the mid 1990s that inclusion of students' and pupils' perspectives in discussions around educational improvement have really become championed (e.g. Levin, 1994; Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996). In higher education in the past decade, the student evaluative process has escalated dramatically to drive educational enhancement through use of national-level survey instruments, such as the UK's National Student Survey (NSS), the American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the Dutch National Student Survey (NSE). As Cook-Sather (2006) concludes, the 'student voice' is now firmly incorporated into the thinking and vocabulary of educational reform.

In higher education research, studies of student surveys have focused overwhelmingly on quantitative ratings, assessing the validity and reliability of these measures (Cheng & Marsh, 2010; Richardson, Slater, & Wilson, 2007; Spooren, Brocx, & Mortelmans, 2013). Most surveys also collect open written feedback comments, but these have been largely overlooked, not least because of the challenges of systematically analysing subjective commentary. The few studies that do examine written feedback

highlight the value and richness of students' comments for isolating issues and directing local enhancement activity (Alhija & Fresko, 2009; Buckley, 2012; Zaitseva, Milsom, & Stewart, 2013).

Students' written comments are valued and preferred by many academics (Svinicki, 2001). Alhija and Fresko (2009) report how positive written comments are often more frequent than negative comments, and generously praise good teaching. However, in the higher education research and professional literature, more attention is associated with negative feedback and the effects of criticism on teachers, particularly where comments are personalised and evaluations link to performance management. Buckley (2012) refers to a common perception amongst academics of surveys being used as 'a stick to beat us with' and Grove (2012) reports concerns over the opportunity surveys provide for naming and shaming. The effects of these concerns are very real. Arthur (2009) and Teelken (2012) evidence lecturers' frustration, distress and anxiety on being the subject of evaluation, in some cases generating feelings of embarrassment and shame. Not only can effects of criticism be demotivating (Light & Cox, 2001), they can be counter-productive; Moore and Kuol (2005) found that where lecturers had performance judged negatively they would often experience dejection and withdraw from the commitment to teaching effectiveness. Many others struggle to accept student feedback, or simply ignore it (Arthur, 2009; Simpson & Siguaw, 2000).

In examination of written feedback responses, the primary interest is usually on analysis of content themes – 'what' the comments are about. However, teaching involves interactional processes, so it would be incomplete simply to analyse student written feedback focusing purely on the target content, interpreting as though comments were objective assessments devoid of any

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emotion. A focus on the ‘how’ – the manner in which feedback is presented – can reveal far more. Attention to the grammatical form and intensity of language used has potential to reveal insight into students’ relationships with teachers and the institution. The past few decades have seen significant advances in understanding of the linguistic structure and semantics of evaluative discourse. Significantly, researchers point to the dialogic function (Bakhtin, 1981; Halliday, 1994; Hunston, 2011; Martin & White, 2005): the writer will likely be aware that their words will be read and will take a position in relation to both the subject of the evaluation and the readership. Consciously or subconsciously, students will make choices in how comments are phrased. And the choices will be made for a reason.

Very few studies have examined systematically the emotional content of student feedback and the dialogic stance from which experiences and evaluations are presented, certainly at the level of the institution. Wongsurawat (2011) described a scheme to assist teachers in appraising comments into those that are objectively reliable and/or subjectively representative. He showed how relating the congruence of an individual’s comment to the ‘average’ of the class was useful in isolating those comments where personal bias might be significant. Zaitseva et al. (2013) applied automated semantic analysis software to institutional survey feedback comments and demonstrated how the sentiments associated with certain aspects of academic experience were prone to switch polarity at different stages of the study lifecycle. Tucker (2014) also examined survey feedback at the institution level, concluding that teachers were frequently praised and that offensive and unprofessional criticisms were actually very rare. Each study points to the complexities of language used and signal how students’ language could be examined to look beyond the content to provide insight into underlying sentiments. However, there is a lack of theoretically grounded analysis of the language that students use, that may inform systematic examinations of the interpersonal and emotive dimensions to written feedback. This study attempts to address this gap by drawing on relevant contemporary linguistic theory and applying an established analytical framework to examine patterns of language used by students when evaluating teaching and the academic experience.

Conceptual framework: appraisal theory

Linguistic researchers such as Halliday (1994), Hyland (1994), Martin and White (2005), and Hunston (2011) point to the strong interpersonal dimension that influences language use, and particularly so with evaluative discourse. Student feedback comments contain variously amplified emotions, polite suggestions, frustrated rants and a whole range of subtle and stark expressive features. Survey written comments are a particularly distinctive register. They are typically short phrases (Table 1), often lacking the sentence structure of traditional formal writing and sharing similarities with conversational speech: single words, partial clauses and long, continuous chains of clauses that lack sentence structure. Biber (2006) explains how linguistic markers of

stance occur more frequently in spoken registers and this appears the case also in these informal written comments.

Because of the complexities of language, any analysis of form and meaning requires an organisational and conceptual framework. There have been numerous studies examining the language of both evaluation and stance (Hunston, 1994; Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Martin, 2000). The most formalised and theory-grounded model is the appraisal framework described by Martin and White (2005). This draws upon the broader field of systemic functional linguistics, developed by Michael Halliday and colleagues over the past three decades (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). This theory interprets language as functional with a fundamental idea being that representational, interpersonal and textual aspects of language interact closely. So when, for example, a student describes a learning experience to faculty, they do so from a value position or stance that is influenced by their relationship with their teachers, which in turn influences how phrasing is prioritised and organised.

Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) specifically describes the forms of language used in communicating opinion and emotion. Summarised as an organisational taxonomy, the appraisal framework (Fig. 1) guides analysis of evaluative language and interpersonal positioning in texts. It comprises three major sub-systems shown in Fig. 1: *Attitude*, *Engagement* and *Graduation*.

Attitude deals mostly with those parts of language that identify the evaluator’s personal feelings and values and is subdivided into regions of Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. Affect concerns the author’s emotions as construed explicitly or implicitly within the text. Judgement concerns their assessments of other peoples’ character and behaviour, inevitably determined by cultural and ideological values (Coffin, 2003). Martin and White (2005) group judgements into those dealing with general admiration and respect, such as how special, capable or determined a person is (social esteem), and those dealing with behaviours relating to social codes, ethics or rules (social sanction). Appreciation is concerned with evaluations of products and processes, appreciation of the qualities, aesthetics or value of ‘things’. This would include assessments of how worthwhile an activity has been, how well-designed a course was or how something captured the attention.

The sub-systems of *Engagement* and *Graduation* are concerned with an evaluator’s interpersonal positioning. Appraisal theory is informed by the work of Bakhtin (1981) in that communication is more than representational, but dialogic, occurring against a backdrop of past voices and in anticipation of future responses. *Engagement* considers the extent to which the writer acknowledges these other voices and any tensions with alternative opinions. To illustrate, a phrase such as ‘he is a fantastic lecturer’ is stated as a bare assertion that does not acknowledge any other viewpoint, nor indicate tension with another view. Following Bakhtin (1981) this would be termed ‘monoglossic’ as it involves only the single voice of the author. In contrast, a claim fronted by ‘In my view...’, or accompanied by modal verbs or adverbs (could, possibly) indicates a presence of different viewpoints (heteroglossia) as the author feels a need to position the view with respect to an alternative opinion. *Graduation* concerns the amplification of language. Something described as ‘okay’ or ‘sort of engaging’ carries less force and focus than something described as ‘exhilarating’ or ‘truly inspirational’.

Collectively, these lenses allow the main dimensions of any evaluative language to be identified and organised, and from this, issues such as the positionality or stance of the evaluator may be interpreted. Beyond the appraisal framework other researchers point to additional lexical and grammatical indicators that can help identify positionality such as modal verbs and adverbs (Aijmer, 2002; Biber, 2006; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan,

Table 1
Profile of written feedback data from Year 1 undergraduate students.

	Comments on positive aspects	Comments on negative aspects
Individuals leaving comment (n=815)	601	631
Clauses	1490	1808
Words	10,969	15,820
Mean number of words per individual	18.25	25.07

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