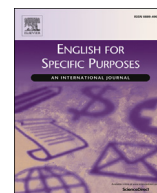




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From the Editors

# “New opportunities” and “Strong performance”: Evaluative adjectives in letters to shareholders and potential for pedagogically-downsized specialized corpora



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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the use of evaluative adjectives within letters to the shareholders from the top 100 corporations from the 2016 Fortune 500 list. The letter represents an important promotional genre and is published annually to report financial performance while also projecting a vision for future success and continued growth. These influential messages detail and frame institutional vision and strategy as they attempt to maintain relationships with current investors while attracting new ones. This paper adopts Thompson and Hunston's term of *evaluation* and its definition as “the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or proposition” (2000, p. 5) as it investigates the semantic classes of evaluative adjectives present in the letters and their function within this ESP genre of interest. While there are many features that reflect and realize evaluation, adjectives are the focus of this inquiry because their overt evaluative quality makes them an accessible item to extract and analyze with basic corpus techniques which could be taught and applied within a classroom setting. This paper reports the use of evaluative adjectives while also displaying that little salient variation exists between a sub-corpus of only 10 letters and the full corpus collection. With little noticeable variation and numerous learning affordances, a pedagogically-downsized specialized corpus can be easily compiled, analyzed, and implemented in EBP and other ESP contexts.

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## 1. Introduction

Evaluation is “the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about” (Thompson & Hunston, 2000, p. 5) and can be reflected in a variety of grammatical markers, e.g. modal verbs like *should* and *could*, stance adverbs such as *obviously* and *probably*, and adjectives such as *amazing* and *incredible* (see Biber, 2006a, 2006b for a more complete list). Within English for Academic Purposes (EAP) research, evaluative features have been investigated in peer review of journal article submissions (Fortanet, 2008; Hewings, 2004), tenure and promotion letters (Hyon, 2011), doctoral theses discussions (Geng & Wharton, 2016), discussion sessions following conference presentations (Querol-Julián & Fortanet-Gómez, 2012), journal article highlights (Yang, 2016), book

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reviews (Römer, 2008), research article abstracts in the sciences (Stotesbury, 2003), academic weblogs (Luzon, 2012), undergraduate/graduate and/or international student writing (Hyland, 2009, 2010; Hyland & Diani, 2009) as well as comparative studies of evaluative features across academic registers (Biber & Finegan, 1989; Biber, 2006a, 2006b; Swales & Burke, 2003). While a variety of approaches and terminology have been applied in these investigations, e.g. stance (Biber & Finegan, 1989; Biber, 2006a, 2006b), appraisal (Martin, 2000; Martin & White, 2005), metadiscourse (Hyland & Tse, 2004), proximity (Hyland, 2010), and engagement (Hyland, 2009), this article applies evaluation as “the broad cover term” for the linguistic items which reflect various affective meanings and attitudes towards entities and propositions (Thompson & Hunston, 2000, p. 5).

Although informed by research conducted for and in EAP contexts, this study is more closely connected to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) generally and English for Business Purposes (EBP) specifically. Within ESP, there has been much work identifying salient lexicogrammatical patterns and mapping functional move sequences (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1991) in ESP genres of interest such as company audit reports (Flowerdew & Wan, 2010), letters of application (Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Upton & Connor, 2001), and tax computation letters (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006); these studies commonly discuss the implications of their findings for ESP materials and pedagogy. However, research on the evaluative features present within professional genres of ESP and EBP interest is lacking in comparison to EAP. A notable exception, Hyland (1998), investigated metadiscourse, the “linguistic elements that help realize the rational, credible, and affective appeals that contribute to the persuasiveness of a text”, within letters to shareholders published in Hong Kong between 1992 and 1994. In the article, Hyland detailed the rhetorical importance of metadiscourse within shareholder letters and its role in “building credibility, resolving uncertainty, and avoiding disputes” (p. 226) while also asserting that “those interested in business writing need to become more aware of how metadiscourse is used to accomplish persuasive goals” (p. 225). Although the present study applies the broader term of evaluation, this study is motivated by a similar interest in the evaluative lexis of the letters, i.e. its metadiscourse and rhetorical objectives, and its potential value to EBP novice writers. Thus, this analysis seeks to investigate evaluative adjectives and their rhetorical functioning within the letter while also highlighting how EBP learners can gain insight into their target discourse community through collecting, organizing, and analyzing small, specialized corpora. This article will demonstrate that through pedagogical downsizing of a specialized corpora, students may more easily access and converge upon the same insights by exploring a manageable, student-friendly corpus of 10 texts than a more cumbersome yet more comprehensive collection corpus of 100 texts.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Business communication and corpus-aided EBP research

In the increasingly globalized world of the past half century, the English language has proliferated and has become established as the language of international business. During this same period, functionalist perspectives on language and its variation according to context have also been popularized as a result of advances in register analysis. Concomitantly, ESP research expanded as researchers sought to detail the variation in language usage present in a host of academic and professional texts and settings. Quite naturally, EBP soon emerged as English proficiency became an imperative for international communication and more programs devoted to teaching business English were started. Business communication was no longer viewed “as simply a matter of putting words together” (Bhatia & Bhatia, 2013, p. 27) or “knowing the semantics of lexico-grammar” (Bhatia & Bremner, 2012, p. 412) as it was increasingly investigated for how it achieved “the desired impact on the members of a specifically relevant discourse community” (Bhatia & Bremner, 2012, p. 412).

As researchers sought to unveil the conventions by which members of professional communities produce texts and negotiate meanings and identities, genre theory and genre analysis put forward by Swales (1991) and Bhatia (1993) stimulated one of the more productive areas of EBP research: genre analyses of commonly produced and consumed professional texts. In recent years, genre analysis of these professional texts has often applied corpus linguistic techniques to aid in the identification of salient lexicogrammatical patterns and identification of rhetorical structures in genres such as negotiation letters (Pinto dos Santos, 2002), responses to client inquiries (Mulken & van der Meer, 2005), cover letters (Crossley, 2007), tax computation letters (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006), business reports (Yeung, 2007), and online advertisements (Labrador, Ramon, Alaiz-Moretón, & Sanjurjo-González, 2014). Corpus methods have also been applied to reveal the linguistic elements present in business communication that reflect institutional identity, values, and ideology and how corporations discursively engage and manage issues such as the economic recession or the environment. (e.g. Lischinsky, 2011, 2015; Poole, 2016). However, while the pedagogical implications of the former investigations of professional genres of interest have been offered, the latter corpus-aided studies on what could be considered the evaluative aspects of these texts have been less explicit about the potential pedagogical value of their findings. Further, although pedagogical approaches to teaching evaluation in EAP settings have received attention (e.g. Bloch, 2003), similar approaches for instructing evaluation and teaching evaluative lexis have not been fully explored in EBP.

### 2.2. Letters to shareholders

From memos to interviews and manuals to reports, arguably no business genre includes such attention to salesmanship, persuasion, and the overt public promotion of company success, strategy, and vision as the letter to the shareholder. While

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