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Generality in student and expert epistemic stance: A corpus analysis of first-year, upper-level, and published academic writing

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ABSTRACT

Research highlights the importance of stance in academic writing, and recent research shows increasing emphasis on stance in undergraduate writing. Most studies of student writing focus on epistemic stance in terms of certainty and not generality; yet instructional materials suggest that developing writers need to learn to limit generalizations. This study examines the use of certain indefinite pronouns and extreme amplifiers that help indicate generality as a part of stance in three corpora: new college writing, advanced student writing, and published academic writing. The study shows two specific and shared rhetorical uses of generalization markers, emphasizing the wide applicability of a claim and projecting shared ideas. The study also shows clear differences in the frequency of generalizations used and the breadth or scope of generalizations made. Published academic writing contains the fewest generalization markers, while new college writing shows the most generalizations as well as generalizations that span large groups and periods of time. The findings suggest that in non-discipline specific essay writing, new college students' frequent use of generalization markers contrasts the more circumspect stance features in advanced student and published discipline-specific writing, posing questions for writing instruction as well as essay-based writing assessment.

1. Introduction

Numerous studies highlight the importance of stance conventions in expert academic writing (e.g., Gross & Chesley, 2012; Hyland, 2005), and recent research shows increasing emphasis on stance in undergraduate student writing as well (Hyland, 2004; Soliday, 2011). Stance conventions influence the effectiveness of English language learner (L2) and native speaker (L1) student writers and the writing scores they receive (Barton, 1993; Coffin, 2002; Hood, 2004; Wu, 2007). For example, writing instructors favor critical distance and dialogic expansion when grading undergraduate papers (Lancaster, 2014) as well as

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qualifying expressions in writing by students transitioning into higher education (Aull & Lancaster, 2014). Stance conventions are not always fully grasped by students, however, and they may require explicit attention and practice (Hyland, 2012).

Stance is broadly conceived as writers' rhetorically expressed attitude toward the propositions in a text (Berman & Ravid, 2009; Hyland, 2012, p. 134).[1] The complexity of stance is highlighted by the range of stance-related concepts in research, including evidentiality (Chafe & Nichols, 1986), evaluation (Conrad & Biber, 2000; Hunston & Thompson, 2001; Labov & Waletzky, 1967), appraisal (Martin, 2005), metadiscourse (Vande Kopple, 1985; Hyland, 2005), and positioning (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). In academic writing, stance encompasses both "attitudinal" and "epistemic" features; the former expresses "an attitude that conveys a judgment," while the latter addresses evidentiality, or the "truth, reliability, or possibility of a given statement" (Uccelli et al., 2013). Features related to epistemic meanings tend to be "considerably more important in academic research writing than the attitudinal meanings" (Gray & Biber, 2012, p. 19).

To account for multiple dimensions of stance in relation to cognitive development, Berman, Ragnarsdóttir, and Strömqvist (2002) created a framework for discourse stance that has been used as a lens for studying student writers transitioning between secondary and post-secondary education (Uccelli et al., 2013).[2] The framework, which aims to identify stance features that reflect cognitive, socio-cognitive, and meta-cognitive development, outlines three interrelated stance dimensions: orientation (sender, text, recipient), attitude (epistemic, deontic, affective), and generality (of specific vs. general reference and quantification) (2002, p. 5). Studies of academic writing have addressed similar constructs, e.g., we can see overlap between epistemic and deontic attitude and "assessments of the status of knowledge in a text"; between affective attitude and "personal attitudes" (Jiang & Hyland, 2015, p. 3); and, perhaps, between generality and the limitations of a proposition, addressed more below.[3] But most studies of stance in developing student writing focus on epistemic stance in terms of certainty and do not highlight generality (e.g., Aull, 2015a; Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Hyland, 2012; Uccelli et al., 2013; Lancaster, 2014).

Research specifically focusing on generality in academic writing is rare perhaps because generalized reference in the form of indefinite pronouns in written academic discourse is rare (Biber, Conrad, Reppen, Byrd, & Helt, 2002), and because generality may be seen as discipline-specific; e.g., the tendency to highlight the "generality of the findings" in writing in scientific fields (Jiang & Hyland, 2015, p. 15). Another reason generality may be under-examined is that it appears to be accounted for under the umbrella of evidentiality and epistemic stance. For example, (Biber et al. 1999, p. 854) describe, "Epistemic markers express the speaker's judgment about the certainty, reliability, and limitations of the proposition," and (Jiang & Hyland, 2015, p. 9) write that "evidentiality refers to epistemic aspects of stance and includes meanings of certainty, doubt, actuality, precision, or limitation," all of which indicate "assessments of certainty." In these treatments, "limitation," which could be seen as the extent to which something is generalizable, and "certainty," which could be seen as whether or not something is true (or whether the writer should show full commitment to whether it is true), are both implied as assessments of certainty. In this study, however, certain discourse features seemed to indicate generality more than certainty, and there were statements in which both appeared as aspects of epistemic stance. For instance, in the student sentence *Anyone cheating in school is definitely wrong,* the use of *Anyone* implies generality; with it, the writer insinuates that "cheating in school is wrong" is a generalizable claim. In the same sentence, the use of *definitely* boosts the claim: the writer shows full certainty toward the claim "cheating in school is wrong." The study below suggests it might be analytically and pedagogically useful to consider generality as overlapping but distinct from certainty, based on distinct functions of markers of generality, the tendency for students to widen rather than limit the generality of their academic claims, and the tendency for advanced academic writers to limit markers of both generality and certainty.

Rare existing studies indicate that generality as a specific aspect of stance merits more scrutiny in developing student writing. Students transitioning into college are more likely to make generalized claims about *people* and *society* than expert writers (Aull, 2015b). In essays written by secondary students for advanced placement (AP) college credit, specificity—not generality—is privileged: "elaborated specificity" characterizes the high-graded essays, while "emphatic generality" characterizes low-graded essays (Brown & Aull, in press). Furthermore, the national organization of U.S. Writing Program Administrators (WPA) Outcomes Statement describes "appropriately qualified … generalizations" as "foundational" to critical thinking, reading, and compositing practices for college composition (p. 2), and instructional materials warn new college writers against generalizations as a fallacy. In this research and instructional material, the terms *generalization* and *generality* refer to the extent to which a claim can be generalized, but this aspect of stance remains under-investigated.

This article offers an initial examination of selected features that indicate generality in writing by new college students, advanced students, and published academics. The following questions guided our inquiry: How do new college student

[1] Some treatments of stance encompass writers' relationship to both "readers and their material" (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Soliday, 2011, p. 37), or not only attitudinal and epistemic stance but interactional as well (Martin, 2005), though this review and the subsequent study specifically concern stance features that express writers' position relative to material.

[2] Berman et al.'s use of *generality* is also taken up to describe unspecification in conversational analysis (Zhang, 1998) and distillation and abstraction in critical discourse analysis (Van Leeuwen, 1995).

[3] Hyland's (2005) popular model of stance and engagement in academic discourse, for example, accounts for the notion of orientation in that features of stance are "writer positioning," or more writer-oriented, while features of engagement are "reader positioning," or more reader-oriented (pp. 178, 182); like Berman et al.'s "text-orientation," Ädel (2006) and Aull (2015b) draw attention to features that explicitly draw attention to the "world of discourse" in the unfolding argument in the text. In studies of both advanced and developing academic writing, attitude is addressed in attitude markers as well as evidential features of epistemic stance like hedges and boosters (Barton, 1993; Vande Kopple, 2002; Hyland, 2005).